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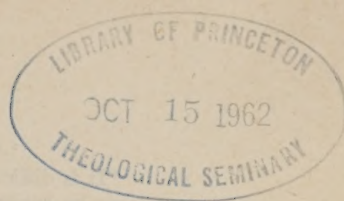
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Maclaren's

EXPOSITIONS
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HOLY SCRIPTURE

✓ *by*

ALEXANDER MACLAREN, D.D., Litt.D.

Volume 2

II Samuel, I & II Kings,
I & II Chronicles, Ezra,
Nehemiah, Esther, Job,
Proverbs, Ecclesiastes

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*EXPOSITIONS OF
HOLY SCRIPTURE*

ALEXANDER MACLAREN, D. D., Litt. D.

SECOND SAMUEL AND
THE BOOKS OF KINGS
TO SECOND KINGS VII

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THE SECOND BOOK OF SAMUEL

THE BRIGHT DAWN OF A REIGN

'And it came to pass after this, that David enquired of the Lord, saying, Shall I go up into any of the cities of Judah? And the Lord said unto him, Go up. And David said, Whither shall I go up? And He said, Unto Hebron. 2. So David went up thither, and his two wives also, Ahinoam the Jezreelitess, and Abigail, Nabal's wife, the Carmelite. 3. And his men that were with him did David bring up, every man with his household: and they dwelt in the cities of Hebron. 4. And the men of Judah came, and there they anointed David king over the house of Judah. And they told David, saying, That the men of Jabesh-gilead were they that buried Saul. 5. And David sent messengers unto the men of Jabesh-gilead, and said unto them, Blessed be ye of the Lord, that ye have shewed this kindness unto your lord, even unto Saul, and have buried him. 6. And now the Lord shew kindness and truth unto you: and I also will requite you this kindness, because ye have done this thing. 7. Therefore now let your hands be strengthened, and be ye valiant: for your master Saul is dead, and also the house of Judah have anointed me king over them. 8. But Abner the son of Ner, captain of Saul's host, took Ish-bosheth the son of Saul, and brought him over to Mahanaim; 9. And he made him king over Gilead, and over the Ashurites, and over Jezreel, and over Ephraim, and over Benjamin, and over all Israel. 10. Ish-bosheth Saul's son was forty years old when he began to reign over Israel, and reigned two years. But the house of Judah followed David. 11. And the time that David was king in Hebron over the house of Judah was seven years and six months.'—2 SAMUEL II. 1-11.

THE last stage of David's wanderings had brought him to Ziklag, a Philistine city. There he had been for over a year, during which he had won the regard of Achish, the Philistine king of Gath. He had, at Achish's request, accompanied him with his contingent, in the invasion of Israel, which crushed Saul's house at Gilboa; but jealousy on the part of the other Philistine leaders had obliged his patron to send him back to Ziklag. He found it a heap of ashes. An Amalekite raid had carried off all the women and children, and his soldiery were on the point of mutiny. His fortunes seemed desperate, but his courage and faith were high, and he paused not a moment for useless sorrow, but swept after the robbers, swooped down on them like a

bolt out of the blue, and scattered them, recovering the captives and spoil. He went back to the ruins which had been Ziklag, and three days after heard of Saul's death.

The lowest point of his fortunes suddenly turned into the highest, for now the path to the throne was open. But the tidings did not move him to joy. His first thought was not for himself, but for Saul and Jonathan, whose old love to him shone out again, glorified by their deaths. Swift vengeance from his hand struck Saul's slayer; the lovely elegy on the great king and his son eased his heart. Then he turned to front his new circumstances, and this passage shows how a God-fearing man will meet the summons to dignity which is duty. It sets forth David's conduct in three aspects—his assumption of his kingdom, his loving regard for Saul's memory, and his demeanour in the face of rebellion.

I. David was now about thirty years old, and had had his character tested and matured by his hard experiences. He 'learned in suffering what he taught in song.' Exile, poverty, and danger are harsh but effectual teachers, if accepted by a devout spirit, and fronted with brave effort. The fugitive's cave was a good preparation for the king's palace. The throne to which he was called was no soft seat for repose. The Philistine invasion had torn away all the northern territory. He took the helm in a tempest. What was he to do? Ziklag was untenable; where was he to take his men? He could not stop in the Philistine territory, and he saw no way clear.

God's servants generally find that their promotion means harder duties and multiplied perplexities. 'Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.' David

did what we shall do, if we are wise—he asked God to guide him. How that guidance was asked and given we are not here told; but the analogy of 1 Samuel xxx. 7, 8, suggests that it was by the Urim and Thummim, interpreted by the high-priest. The form of inquiry seems to have been that a course of action, suggested by the inquirer, was decided for him by a ‘Yes’ or a ‘No.’ So that there was the exercise of common-sense and judgment in formulating the proposed course, as well as that of God’s direction in determining it.

That is how we still get divine direction. Bring your own wits to bear on your action, and then do not obstinately stick to what seems right to you, but ask God to negative it if it is wrong, and to confirm you in it if it is right. If we humbly ask Him, ‘Am I to go, or not to go?’ we shall not be left unanswered. We note the contrast between David’s submission to God’s guidance and Saul’s self-willed taking his own way, in spite of Samuel. He began right, and, in the main, he continued as he began. Self-will is sin and ruin. Submission is joy, and peace, and success. God’s kings are viceroys. They have to rule themselves and the world, but they have to be ruled by His will. If they faithfully continue as His servants, they are masters of all besides.

Hebron was a good capital for the new king, for it was a defensible position, in the centre of his own tribe, and sacred by association with the patriarchs. Established there, David was recognised as king by his fellow-tribesmen, and by them only. No doubt, tribal jealousy was partly the cause of this limited recognition, but probably the confusion incident to the Philistine victory contributed to it. The result was that,

though David's designation by Samuel to the kingship was universally known, and his candidature had been popular, he had seven years of precarious sway over this mere fraction of the nation. We read of no impatience on his part. He let events shape themselves, or, rather, he let God shape events.

Passiveness is not always indolence. There are two ways of compassing our desires. One is that which David himself tells us is the 'young lions' way, of struggling and fighting, and that often ends in 'lacking and suffering hunger'; the other is that of waiting on the Lord, and that always ends in 'not lacking any good.' If we are sure that God has promised us anything, and if He does not seem to have yet opened the way to obtaining it, our 'strength is to sit still.' If He has given us Hebron, we can be patient till He please to give us Jerusalem.

II. Another side of David's character comes beautifully out in his treatment of the men of Jabesh-gilead. That town owed much to Saul (1 Samuel xi.), and its gratitude lasted, and dared much for him. It was a brave dash that they made across Jordan to carry off Saul's corpse from its ignominious exposure; for it both defied the Philistines, and might be construed as hostile to David. But his heart was too true to ancient friendship to do anything but glow with admiring sympathy at that exhibition of affectionate remembrance. Reconciling death had swept away all memories of Saul's insane jealousy, and he owned a brother in every one who showed kindness to the unfortunate king.

If the Jabesh-Gileadites are a pattern of long-memoried gratitude, David's commendation of them is a model of love which survives injuries, and of for-

givingness which forgets them. It was as politic as it was generous. Nothing could have been better calculated to attach Saul's most devoted partisans to him than showing that he honoured their faithful attachment to Saul, and nothing could have more clearly defined his own position during his wanderings as being no rebel. The dictates of true policy and those of devout generosity always coincide. It is ever a blunder to be unforgiving, and mercifulness is always expedient.

But David did not hide his claim to the allegiance of these true hearts. He called on them to transfer their loyalty to himself, and he asserted, not his anointing by Samuel, but his recognition by Judah, the premier tribe, as the motive. No doubt the divine appointment is implied, as it was generally known, but Judah's action is put forward as showing the beginning of the realisation of the divine designation. The men of Jabesh needed to 'be valiant' if they were to acknowledge him; for it was a far cry to Hebron, and the forces of the rival son of Saul were overrunning the northern districts.

We have to take our sides in the age-long and world-wide warfare between God's King and the pretenders to His throne, and it often wants much courage to do so when surrounded by antagonists. It seems a long way off to the true monarch, and Abner's army is a very solid reality, and very near. But it is safest to take the side of the distant, rightful king.

III. David's bearing in the face of opposition and rebellion comes out in verses 8-11. Abner, Saul's cousin, who had been in high position when the stripling from Bethlehem fought Goliath, was not capable of the self-effacement involved in acquiescing in David's accession, though he knew that the Lord

had 'sworn to David.' So he set up a 'King Do-nothing' in the person of a weak lad, the only survivor of Saul's sons. A strange state of mind that, which struggled against a recognised divine appointment!

But is it only Abner who knew that he was trying to thwart God's will? Thousands of us are doing the same, and the attempt answers as well as it did in his case.

The puppet king is named Ishbosheth in the lesson, but 1 Chronicles viii. 33 and ix. 39 show that his real name was Esh-baal. The former word means 'The man of shame'; the latter, 'The man of Baal.' The existence of Baal as an element in names seems to indicate the incompleteness of the emancipation from idolatry in Saul's time, and the change will then indicate the keener monotheistic conscience of later days. Another explanation is that Baal ('Lord') was in these cases used as a name for Jehovah, and was 'changed at a later period for the purpose of avoiding what was interpreted then as a compound of the name of the Phœnician deity Baal' (Driver, *Notes on Hebrew Text of the Books of Samuel*, p. 186).

Abner set up his tool in Mahanaim, sacred for its associations with Jacob, but, no doubt, recommended to him rather by its position on the east side of Jordan, safe from the attacks of the victorious Philistines. From that fastness he made raids to recover the territory which the victory at Gilboa had won for them. First Gilead, on the same side of the river as Mahanaim; then the territory of the 'Ashurites'—probably a scribe's error for 'Asherites,' the most northern tribe; and then, coming southward, the great plain, with its cities, Ephraim and Benjamin,—in fact, all Israel except Judah's country was reconquered for Saul's house.

The account of the distribution of territory between the two monarchies is broken by the parenthesis in verse 10, which, both by its awkward interposition in the middle of a sentence and by its difficult chronological statements, looks like a late addition.

For seven and a half years David reigned in Hebron, but was rather shut up there than ruling thence. The most noteworthy fact is that he, soldier as he was, took no steps to put down Abner's rebellion. He defended himself when attacked, but that was all. The three figures of David, Ishbosheth, and Abner point lessons. Silent, still, trustful, and therefore patient, David shows us how faith in God can lead to possessing one's soul in patience till 'the vision' comes. We may have to wait for it, but 'it will surely come,' and what is time enough for God should be time enough for us. Saul's son was a poor, weak creature, who would never have thought of resisting David but for the stronger will behind him. To be weak is, in this world full of tempters, to drift into being wicked. We have to learn betimes to say 'No,' and to stick to it. Moral weakness attracts tempters as surely as a camel fallen by the caravan track draws vultures from every corner of the sky. The fierce soldier who fought for his own hand while professing to be moved by loyalty to the dead king, may stand as a type of the self-deception with which we gloss over our ugliest selfishness with fine names, and for an instance of the madness which leads men to set themselves against God's plans, and therefore to be dashed in pieces, as some slim barrier reared across the track of a train would be. To 'rush against the thick bosses of the Almighty's buckler' does no harm to the buckler, but kills the insane assailant.

ONE FOLD AND ONE SHEPHERD

'Then came all the tribes of Israel to David unto Hebron, and spake, saying, Behold, we are thy bone and thy flesh. 2. Also in time past, when Saul was king over us, thou wast he that leddest out and broughtest in Israel: and the Lord said to thee, Thou shalt feed My people Israel, and thou shalt be a captain over Israel. 3. So all the elders of Israel came to the king to Hebron; and king David made a league with them in Hebron before the Lord: and they anointed David king over Israel. 4. David was thirty years old when he began to reign; and he reigned forty years. 5. In Hebron he reigned over Judah seven years and six months; and in Jerusalem he reigned thirty and three years over all Israel and Judah. 6. And the king and his men went to Jerusalem unto the Jebusites, the inhabitants of the land; which spake unto David, saying, Except thou take away the blind and the lame, thou shalt not come in hither: thinking, David cannot come in hither. 7. Nevertheless, David took the strong hold of Zion: the same is the city of David. 8. And David said on that day, Whosoever getteth up to the gutter, and smiteth the Jebusites, and the lame and the blind, that are hated of David's soul, he shall be chief and captain. Wherefore they said, The blind and the lame shall not come into the house. 9. So David dwelt in the fort, and called it the city of David. And David built round about from Millo and inward. 10. And David went on, and grew great, and the Lord God of hosts was with him. 11. And Hiram king of Tyre sent messengers to David, and cedar trees, and carpenters, and masons: and they built David an house. 12. And David perceived that the Lord had established him king over Israel, and that He had exalted his kingdom for His people Israel's sake.'—2 SAMUEL v. 1-12.

THE dark day on Gilboa put the Philistines in possession of most of Saul's kingdom. Only in the south David held his ground, and Abner had to cross Jordan to find a place of security for the remnants of the royal house. The completeness of the Philistine conquest is marked, not only by Abner's flight to Mahanaim, but by the reckoning that David reigned for seven and a half years and Ishbosheth two; for these periods must be supposed to have ended very nearly at the same time, and thus there would be about five years before the invaders were so far got rid of that Ishbosheth exercised sovereignty over his part of Israel. It is singular that David should have been left unattacked by the Philistines, and it is probably to be explained by the friendly relations which had sprung up between Achish, king of Gath, and him (1 Samuel xxix.). However that may be, his power was continually increasing during his reign at Hebron over

Judah, and at last Abner's death and the assassination of the poor phantom king, Ishbosheth, brought about the total collapse of opposition.

I. This passage deals first with the submission of the tribes and the reunion of the divided kingdom. A comparison of verse 1 with verse 3 shows that a formal delegation of elders from all the tribes which had held by Ishbosheth, came to Hebron with their submission. The account in 1 Chronicles is a *verbatim* copy of this one, with the addition of a glowing picture of the accompanying feasting and joy. It also places much emphasis on the sincerity of David's new subjects, which needed some endorsement; for loyalty which has been disloyal as long as it durst, may be suspected. The elders have their mouths full of excellent reasons for recognising David's kingship,—he is their brother; he was their true leader in war, even in Saul's time; he has been appointed by God to be king and commander. Unfortunately, it had taken the elders seven and a half years to feel the force of these reasons, and probably their perceptions would still have remained dull if Abner and Ishbosheth had lived. But David is both magnanimous and politic, and neither bloodshed nor reproaches mar the close of the strife. Seldom has so formidable a civil war been ended with so complete an amnesty. Observe the expression that David 'made a league with them . . . before the Lord.' The Israelitish monarch was no despot, but, in modern language, a constitutional king, between whom and his subjects there was a compact, which he as well as they had to observe. In what sense was it made 'before the Lord'? The ark was not at Hebron, though the priests were; and the phrase is at once a testimony to the religious character of the 'league'

and to the consciousness of God's presence, apart from the symbol of His presence. It points to a higher conception than that which brought the ark to Ebenezer, and dreamed that the ark had brought God to the army. Modern theories of the religious development of the Old Testament ask us to recognise these two conceptions as successive. The fact is that they were contemporaneous, and that the difference between them is not one of time, but of spiritual susceptibility. Who anointed David for this third time? Apparently the elders, for priests are not mentioned. Samuel had anointed him, as token of the divine choice and symbol of the divine gifts for his office. The men of Judah had anointed him, and finally the elders did so, in token of the popular confirmation of God's choice.

So David has reached the throne at last. Schooled by suffering, and in the full maturity of his powers, enriched by the singularly varied experiences of his changeful life, tempered by the swift alternations of heat and cold, polished by friction, consolidated by heavy blows, he has been welded into a fitting instrument for God's purposes. Thus does He ever prepare for larger service. Thus does He ever reward patient trust. Through trials to a throne is the law for all noble lives in regard to their earthly progress, as well as in regard to the relation between earth and heaven. But David is not only a pattern instance of how God trains His servants, but he is a prophetic person; and in his progress to his kingdom we have dimly, but really, shadowed the path by which his Son and Lord attains to His,—a path thickly strewn with thorns, and plunging into 'valleys of the shadow of death' compared with which David's darkest hour was sunny. The psalms of the persecuted exile have sounding

through them a deeper sorrow; for they 'testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ.' 'No cross, no crown,' is the lesson of David's earlier life.

II. We have, next, the first victory of the reunited nation. Hebron was too far south for the capital of the whole kingdom. Jerusalem was more central, and, from its position, surrounded on three sides with steep ravines, was a strong military post. David's soldier's eye saw its advantages; and he, no doubt, desired to weld the monarchy together by participation in danger and triumph. The new glow of national unity would seek some great exploit, and would resent as an insult the presence of the Jebusites in their stronghold. The attack on it immediately follows the recognition of David's kingship. It is not necessary here to discuss the difficulties in verses 6-8; but we note that they give, first, the insolent boast of the besieged, then the twofold answer to it in fact and in word, and last, the memorial of the victory in a proverb. Apparently the Jebusites' taunt is best understood as in the margin of the Revised Version, 'Thou shalt not come in hither, but the blind and the lame shall turn thee away.' They were so sure that their ravines made them safe, that they either actually manned their walls with blind men and cripples, or jeeringly shouted to the enemy across the valley that these would do for a garrison. The other possible meaning of the words as they stand in the Authorised Version would make 'the blind and lame' refer to David's men, and the taunt would mean, 'You will have to weed out your men. It will take sharper eyes and more agile limbs than theirs to clamber up here'; but the former explanation is the more probable. Such braggart speeches were quite in the manner of ancient warfare.

Verse 7 tells what the answer to this mocking shout from the ramparts was. David did the impossible, and took the city. Courage built on faith has a way of making the world's predictions of what it cannot do look rather ridiculous. David wastes no words in answering the taunt; but it stirs him to fierce anger, and nerves him and his men for their desperate charge. The obscure words in verse 8, which he speaks to his soldiers, do not need the supplement given in the Authorised Version. The king's quick eye had seen a practical path for scaling the cliffs up some watercourse, where there might be projections or vegetation to pull oneself up by, or shelter which would hide the assailants from the defenders; and he bids any one who would smite the Jebusites take that road up, and, when he is up, 'smite.' He heartens his men for the assault by his description of the enemy. They had talked about 'blind and lame'; that is what they really are, or as unable to stand against the Israelites' fierce and sudden burst as if they were: and furthermore, they are 'hated of David's soul.' It is a flash of the rage of battle which shows us David in a new light. He was a born captain as well as king; and here he exhibits the general's power to see, as by instinct, the weak point and to hurl his men on it. His swift decision and fiery eloquence stir his men's blood like the sound of a trumpet. The proverb that rose from the capture is best read as in the Revised Version: 'There are the blind and the lame; he cannot come into the house.' The point of it seems to be that, notwithstanding the bragging Jebusites, he did 'come into the house'; and so its use would be to ridicule boasting confidence that was falsified by events, as the Jebusites' had been. It was

worth while to record the boast and its end ; for they teach the always seasonable lesson of the folly of over-confidence in apparently impregnable defences. It is a lesson of worldly prudence, but still more of religion. There is always some 'watercourse' overlooked by us, up which the enemy may make his way. Overestimate of our own strength and its companion folly, flippant underestimate of the enemy's power, are, in all worldly affairs, the sure precursors of disaster ; and in the Christian life the only safe temper is that of the man who 'feareth always,' as knowing his own weakness and the strength of his foe, and thereby is driven to that trust which casts out fear.

On the other hand, David's exploit reads us anew the lesson that to the Christian soldier there is nothing impossible, with Jesus Christ for our Captain. There are many unconquered fortresses of evil still to be carried by assault, and they look steep and inaccessible enough ; but there is some way up, and He will show it us. For our own personal struggle with sin, and for the Church's conflict with social evils, this story is an encouragement and a prophecy.

Jerusalem was captured by a reunited nation with its king at its head. As long as our miserable divisions weaken and disgrace us, the Church fights at a disadvantage ; and the hoary fortresses of the foe will not be won till Judah ceases to vex Ephraim, and Ephraim no more envies Judah, but all Christ's servants in one host, with the King known by each to be with them, make the assault.

III. We have, lastly, the growth of the kingdom. I pass over topographical questions, which need not concern us here. The points recorded are David's

establishment in the stronghold, his additions to the city, his increasing greatness and its reason in the presence and favour of 'the God of hosts,' the special instance of this in the friendly intercourse with Hiram of Tyre and the employment of Tyrian workmen, and the recognition of the source and the purpose of his prosperity by the devout king. We see here the conditions of true success,—'The Lord, the God of hosts, was with him.' We see also the right use of it,—'David perceived that the Lord had established him king.' He was not puffed up into self-importance by his elevation, but devoutly and clearly saw who had set him in his lofty place. And, as he traced his royalty to God, so he recognised that he had received it, not for himself, but as a trust to be used, not in self-indulgence, but for the national good,—'and that He had exalted his kingdom for His people Israel's sake.' Whosoever holds firmly by these two thoughts, and lives them, will adorn his position, whatever it may be, and will be one of God's crowned kings, however obscure his lot and small his duties. He who lacks them will misuse his gifts and mar his life, and the more splendid his endowments and the higher his position, the more conspicuous will be his ruin and the heavier his guilt.

DEATH AND LIFE FROM THE ARK

'Again, David gathered together all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. 2. And David arose, and went with all the people that were with him from Baale of Judah, to bring up from thence the ark of God, whose name is called by the name of the Lord of hosts that dwelleth between the cherubims. 3. And they set the ark of God upon a new cart, and brought it out of the house of Abinadab that was in Gibeah: and Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, drove the new cart. 4. And they brought it out of the house of Abinadab which was at Gibeah, accompanying the ark of God: and Ahio went before the ark. 5. And David and all the house of Israel played before the Lord on all manner of instruments made

of fir wood, even on harps, and on psalteries, and on timbrels, and on cornets, and on cymbals. 6. And when they came to Nachon's thrashing-floor, Uzzah put forth his hand to the ark of God, and took hold of it; for the oxen shook it. 7. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah; and God smote him there for his error; and there he died by the ark of God. 8. And David was displeased, because the Lord had made a breach upon Uzzah: and he called the name of the place Perez-uzzah to this day. 9. And David was afraid of the Lord that day, and said, How shall the ark of the Lord come to me? 10. So David would not remove the ark of the Lord unto him into the city of David: but David carried it aside into the house of Obed-edom the Gittite. 11. And the ark of the Lord continued in the house of Obed-edom the Gittite three months: and the Lord blessed Obed-edom, and all his household. 12. And it was told king David, saying, The Lord hath blessed the house of Obed-edom and all that pertaineth unto him, because of the ark of God. So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom into the city of David with gladness.'—2 SAMUEL vi. 1-12.

I. THE first section (verses 1-5) describes the joyful reception and procession. The parallel account in 1 Chronicles states that Baalah, or Baale, was Kirjath-jearim. Probably the former was the more ancient Canaanitish name, and indicates that it had been a Baal sanctuary. If so, the presence of the ark there was at once a symbol and an omen, showing Jehovah's conquest over the obscene and bloody gods of the land, and forecasting His triumph over all the gods of the nations. Every Baale shall one day be a resting-place of the ark of God. The solemn designation of the ark, as 'called by the Name, the name of the Lord of Hosts, that dwelleth between the cherubim,' is significant on this, its reappearance after so long eclipse, and, by emphasising its awful sanctity, prepares for the incidents which are to follow. The manner of the ark's transport was irregular; for the law strictly enjoined its being carried by the Levites by means of bearing-poles resting on their shoulders; and the copying of the Philistines' cart, though a new one was made for the purpose, indicates the desuetude into which the decencies of worship had fallen in seventy years. In 1 Chronicles, the singular words in verse 5, which describe David as playing before the Lord on the very unlikely things for such a purpose, 'all manner of instruments of fir wood.'

become 'with all their might: even with songs,' which seems much more reasonable. A slight alteration in three letters and the transposition of two would bring our text into conformity with 1 Chronicles, and the conjectural emendation is tempting. Who ever heard of fir-wood musical instruments? The specified ones which follow were certainly not made of it, and songs could scarcely fail to be mentioned.

At all events, we see the glad procession streaming out of the little city buried among its woods; the cart drawn by meek oxen, and loaded with the unadorned wooden chest, in the midst; the two sons or descendants of its faithful custodian honoured to be the teamsters; the king with the harp which had cheered him in many a sad hour of exile; and the crowd 'making a joyful noise before the Lord,' which might sound discord in our ears, as some lifted up shrill songs, some touched stringed instruments, some beat on timbrels, some rattled metal rods with movable rings, and some clashed cymbals together. It was a wild scene, in which there was a dangerous resemblance to the frantic jubilations of idolatrous worship. No doubt there were true hearts in that crowd, and none truer than David's. No doubt we have to beware of applying our Christian standards to these early times, and must let a good deal that is sensuous and turbid pass, as, no doubt, God let it pass. But confession of sin in leaving the ark so long forgotten would have been better than this tumultuous joy; and if there had been more trembling in it, it would not have passed so soon into wild terror. Still, on the other hand, that rejoicing crowd does represent, though in crude form, the effect which the consciousness of God's presence should ever have. His felt

nearness should be, as the Psalmist says, 'the gladness of my joy.' Much of our modern religion is far too gloomy, and it is thought to be a sign of devotion and spiritual-mindedness to be sad and of a mortified countenance. Unquestionably, Christianity brings men into the continual presence of very solemn truths about themselves and the world which may well sober them, and make what the world calls mirth incongruous.

'There is no music in the life
That rings with idiot laughter solely.'

But the Man of Sorrows said that His purpose for us was that 'His joy might remain in us, and that our joy might be full'; and we but imperfectly apprehend the gospel if we do not feel that its joys 'much more abound' than its sorrows, and that they even burn brightest, like the lights on safety-buoys, when drenched by stormy seas.

II. The second section contains the dread vindication of the sanctity of the ark, which changed joy into terror, and silenced the songs. At some bad place in the rocky and steep track, the oxen stumbled or were restive. The spot is called in Samuel 'the threshing-floor of Nachon,' but in Chronicles the owner is named 'Chidon.' As the former word means 'a stroke' and the latter 'destruction,' they are probably not to be taken as proper names, but as applied to the place after this event. The name given by David, however—Perez-uzzah—proved the more permanent 'to this day.' Uzzah, who was driving while his brother went in front to pilot the way, naturally stretched out his hand to steady his freight, just as if it had been a sack of corn; and, as if he had touched an electric wire, fell dead, as the story graphically says, 'by the ark of God.' What

confusion and panic would agitate the joyous singers, and how their songs would die on their lips!

What harm was there in Uzzah's action? It was most natural, and, in one point of view, commendable. Any careful waggoner would have done the same with any valuable article he had in charge. Yes; that was just the point of his error and sin, that he saw no difference between the ark and any other valuable article. His intention to help was right enough; but there was profound insensibility to the awful sacredness of the ark, on which even its Levitical bearers were forbidden to lay hands. All his life Uzzah had been accustomed to its presence. It had been one of the familiar pieces of furniture in Abinadab's house, and, no doubt, familiarity had had its usual effect. Do none of us ministers, teachers, and others, to whom the gospel and the worship and ordinances of the Church have been familiar from infancy, treat them in the same fashion? Many a hand is laid on the ark, sometimes to keep it from falling, with more criminal carelessness of its sacredness than Uzzah showed. Note, too, how swiftly an irreverent habit of treating holy things grows. The first error was in breaking the commanded order for removal of the ark by the Levites. Once in the cart, the rest follows. The smallest breach in the feeling of awe and reverence will soon lead to more complete profanation. There is nothing more delicate than the sense of awe. Trifled with ever so little, it speedily disappears. There is far too little of it in our modern religion. Perfect love casts out fear and deepens awe which hath not torment.

Was not the punishment in excess of the sin? We must remember the times, the long neglect of the

ark, the decay of religion in Saul's reign, the critical character of the moment as the beginning of a new era, when it was all-important to print deep the impression of sanctity, and the rude material which had to be dealt with; and we must not forget that God, in His punishments, does not adopt men's ideas of death as such a very dreadful thing. Many since have followed in David's wake, and been 'displeased, because the Lord broke forth upon Uzzah'; but he and they have been wrong. He ought to have known better, and to have understood the lesson of the solemn corpse that lay there by the ark; instead of which he gives way to mere terror, and was 'afraid of the Lord.' David afraid of the Lord! What had become of the rapturous love and strong trust which ring clear through his psalms? Is this the man who called God his rock and fortress and deliverer, his buckler and the horn of his salvation and his high tower, and poured out his soul in burning words, which glow yet through all the centuries and the darkness of earth? It was ill for David to fall thus below himself, but well for us that the eclipse of his faith and love should be recorded, to hearten us, when the like emotions fall asleep in our souls. His consciousness of impurity was wholesome and sound, but his cowering before the ark, as if it were the seat of arbitrary anger, which might flame out destruction for no discernible reason, was a woful darkening of his loving insight into the heart of God.

III. The last section (verses 10-12) gives us the blessings on the house of Obed-edom and the glad removal of the ark to Jerusalem. Obed-edom is called a 'Gittite,' or man of Gath; but he does not appear to have been a Philistine immigrant, but a native of another Gath, a

Levitical city, and himself a Levite. There is an Obededom in the lists of David's Levites in Chronicles who is probably the same man. He did not fear to receive the ark, and, worthily received, the presence which had been a source of disaster and death to idolaters, to profanely curious pry-ers into its secret, and to presumptuous irreverence, became a fountain of unbroken blessing. This twofold effect of the same presence is but a symbol of a solemn law which runs through all life, and is especially manifest in the effects of Christ's work upon men. Everything has two handles, and it depends on ourselves by which of them we lay hold of it, and whether we shall receive a shock that kills, or blessings. The same circumstances of poverty, or wealth, or sorrow, or temptation, make one man better and another worse. The same presence of God will be to one man a joy; to another, a terror. 'What maketh heaven, that maketh hell.' The same gospel received is the fountain of life, purity, peace; and, rejected or neglected, is the source of harm and death. Jesus Christ is 'set for the fall and rising again of many.' Either He is the savour of life unto life, the rock on which we build, or He is the savour of death unto death, the stone on which we stumble and break our limbs.

THE ARK IN THE HOUSE OF OBED-EDOM

'The ark of the Lord continued in the house of Obed-edom the Gittite three months; and the Lord blessed Obed-edom, and all his household.'—2 SAMUEL VI. 11.

NEARLY seventy years had elapsed since the capture of the ark by the Philistines on the fatal field of Aphek. They had carried it and set it in insolent triumph in the Temple of Dagon, as if to proclaim that the Jehovah of Israel was the conquered prisoner of the Philistine god. But the morning showed Dagon's stump prone on the threshold. And so the terrified priests got rid of their dangerous trophy as swiftly as they could. From one Philistine city to another it passed, and everywhere its presence was marked by disease and calamity. So at last they huddled it into some rude cart, leaving the draught-oxen to drag it whither they would. They made straight for the Judæan hills, and in the first little village were welcomed by the inhabitants at their harvest, as they saw them coming across the plain. But again death attended the Presence, and curiosity, which was profanity, was punished. So the villagers were as eager to get rid of the ark as they had been to welcome it, and they passed it on to the little city of *Kirjath-jearim*, 'the city of the woods,' as the name means, or, as we might say, 'Woodville.' And there it lay, neglected and all but forgotten, for nearly seventy years. But as soon as David was established in his newly-won capital he set himself to reorganise the national worship, which had fallen into neglect and almost into disuse. The first step was to bring the ark. And so he passed with a joyful company to *Kirjath*. But again swift death overtakes Uzzah with his irreverent hand. And David shrinks, in the consciousness of his impurity, and bestows the symbol of the

awful Presence in the house of Obed-edom. As we have already noted, he was probably not a Philistine, as the name 'Gittite' at first sight suggests. There is an Obed-edom in the lists of David's Levites, who was an inhabitant of another Gath, and himself of the tribe of Levi.

He was not afraid to receive the ark. There were no idols, no irreverent curiosity, no rash presumption in his house. He feared and served the God of the ark, and so the Presence, which had been a source of disaster to the unworthy, was a source of unbroken blessing to him and to his household.

I have been the more particular in this enumeration of the wanderings of the ark and the opposite effects which its presence produced according to the manner of its reception, because these effects are symbols of a great truth which runs all through human life, and is most especially manifested in the message and the mission of Jesus Christ.

Let us, then, just trace out two or three of the spheres in which we may see the application of this great principle, which makes life so solemn and so awful, which may make it so sad or so glad, so base or so noble.

I. First, then, note the twofold operation of all God's outward dealings.

Everything that befalls us, every object with which we come in contact, all the variety of condition, all the variations of our experience, have one distinct and specific purpose. They are all meant to tell upon character, to make us better in sundry ways, to bring us closer to God, and to fill us more full of Him. And that one effect may be produced by the most opposite incidents, just as in some great machine you may have two wheels turning in opposite ways, and yet con-

tributing to one resulting motion; or, just as the summer and the winter, with all their antitheses, have a single result in the abundant harvest. One force attracts the planet to the sun, one force tends to drive it out into the fields of space; but the two, working together, make it circle in its orbit around its centre. And so, by sorrow and by joy, by light and by dark, by giving and withholding, by granting and refusing, by all the varieties of our circumstances, and by everything that lies around us, God works to prepare us for Himself and to polish His instruments, sometimes plunging the iron into 'baths of hissing tears,' and sometimes heating it 'hot with hopes and fears,' and sometimes 'battering' it 'with the shocks of doom,' but all for the one purpose—that it may be a polished shaft in His quiver.

And whilst, thus, the most opposite things may produce the same effect, the same thing will produce opposite effects according to the way in which we take it. There is nothing that can be relied upon to do a man only good; there is nothing about which we need fear that its mission is only to do evil. For all depends on the recipient, who can make everything to fulfil the purpose for which God has sent him everything.

Here are two men tried by the same poverty. It beats the one down, makes him squalid, querulous, faithless, irreligious, drives him to drink, crushes him; and the other man it steadies and quiets and hardens, and teaches him to look beyond the things seen and temporal to the exceeding riches at God's right hand.

Here are two men tried by wealth; the gold gets into the one man's veins and makes him yellow as with jaundice, and kills him, destroying all that is noble, generous, impulsive, quenching his early dreams and enthusiasms, closing his heart to sweet charity, puffing

him up with a false sense of importance, and laying upon him the dreadful responsibility of misused and selfishly employed possessions. And the other man, tried in the same fashion, out of his wealth makes for himself friends that welcome him into everlasting habitations, and lays up for himself treasures in heaven. The one man is damned and the other man is saved by their use of the same thing.

Here are two men subjected to the same sorrows; the one is absorbed by his selfish regard to his own misery, blinded to all the blessings that still remain, made negligent of tasks and oblivious of the plainest duty. And he goes about saying, 'Oh, if thou hadst been here!' or if, if something else had happened, then this would not have happened. And the other man, passing through the same circumstances, finds that, when his props are taken away, he flings himself on God's breast, and, when the world becomes dark and all the paths dim about him, he looks up to a heaven that fills fuller of meek and swiftly gathering stars as the night falls, and he says, 'It is the Lord; let Him do what seemeth Him good.'

Here are two men tried by the same temptation; it leads the one man away captive 'with a dart through his liver'; the other man by God's grace overcomes it, and is the stronger and the sweeter and the gentler and the humbler because of the dreadful fight. And so you might go the whole round of diverse circumstances, and about each of them find the same double result. Nothing is sure to do a man good; nothing necessarily does him hurt. All depends upon the man himself, and the use he makes of what God in His mercy sends. Two plants may grow in the same soil, be fed by the same dews and benediction from the heavens, be shone upon

by the same sunshine, and the one of them will elaborate from all, sweet juices and fragrance, and the other will elaborate a deadly poison. So, my brother, life is what you and I will to make it, and the events which befall us are for our rising or our falling according as we determine they shall be, and according as we use them.

Think, then, how solemn, how awful, how great a thing it is to stand here a free agent, able to determine my character and my condition, surrounded by all these circumstances and the subject of all these wise and manifold divine dealings, in each of which there lie dormant, to be evoked by me, tremendous possibilities of elevation even to the very presence of God, or of sinking into the depths of separation from Him. The ark of God, that overthrew Dagon and smote Uzzah, was nothing but a fountain of blessing in the household of Obed-edom.

II. Secondly, note the twofold operation of God's character and presence.

The ark was the symbol of a present God, and His presence is meant to be the life and joy of all creatures, and the revelation of Him is meant to be only for our good, giving strength, righteousness, and peace. But the same double possibility which I have been pointing out as inherent in all externals belongs here too, and a man can determine to which aspect of the many-sided infinitude of the divine nature he shall stand in relation. The glass in stained windows is so coloured as that parts of it cut off, and prevent from passing through, different rays of the pure white light. And men's moral natures, the inclination of their hearts, and the set of their wills and energies, cut off, if I may say so, parts of the infinite, white light of the many-sided

divine character, and put them into relations only with some part and aspect of that great whole which we call God. The man that loves the world, the man that is living for self, still more the man that is embruted in the pig-sty of sensuality and vice, cannot see the God whom the pure heart, which loves Him and is purified by its faith, discerns at the centre of all things. But the lower man sees either some very far-off Awfulness, in which he hopes vaguely that there is a kind of good nature that will let him off; or, if he has been shaken out of that superficial creed, which is only a creed for men whose consciences have not been touched, then he can see only a God whose love darkens into retribution, and who is the Judge and the Avenger. And no man can say that such a conception is not part of the truth; but, alas! he on whom the form of such a God glares has incapacitated himself, by his misuse of his powers and of God's world, from seeing the beauty of the love of the Father of us all, the righteous Father who in Christ loves every man.

And thus the thought of God, the consciousness of His Presence, may be like the ark which was its symbol, either dreadful and to be put away, or to be welcomed and blessing to be drawn from it. To many of us I am sure—though I do not know anything about many of you—that thought, 'Thou God seest me,' breeds feelings like the uneasy discomfort of a prisoner when he knows that somewhere in the wall there is a spy-hole at which at any moment a warder's eye may be. And to some of us, blessed be His name, that same thought, 'Thou art near me,' seems to bathe the heart in a sea of sweet rest, and to bring the assurance of a divine Companion that cheers all the solitude. And why is the difference? There are two people sitting in one pew; to the one

man the thought of God is his ghastliest doubt, to the other it is his deepest joy. Wherefore? And which is it to me?

Then, again, this same duality of aspect attaches to the character and presence of God in another way. Because, according to the variety of men's characters, God is obliged to treat them as standing in different relations. He must manifest His judgment, His justice, His punitive justice. There is a solemn verse in one of the Psalms which I may quote in lieu of all words of my own on this matter. 'With the merciful Thou wilt show Thyself merciful, with the pure Thou wilt show Thyself pure, with the froward Thou wilt show Thyself froward.' The present God has to modify His dealings according to the characters of men.

And so, dear friends, for the present life, and, as I believe, for the next life in a far more emphatic and awful way, the same thing makes blessedness and misery, the same thing makes life and death. The sunshine will kill and wither the slimy plants that grow in the dark recesses of some dripping cave; and if you take a fish out of the water, the air clogs its gills and it dies. Bring a man, such as some of you are, into a close, constant contact with the consciousness of the divine righteousness and presence, and you want nothing else to make a hell. The ark of the Lord will flash out its lightnings and Uzzah will die. That great Infinite Being, before whom we stand, holds in His right hand blessings beyond count or price, even the gift of Himself, and in His left His lightnings and His arrows. On which hand are you standing?

III. Lastly, note the twofold operation of God's gospel.

His dealings, His character and presence, and, most

markedly and eminently of all, the gospel that is treasured in Jesus Christ and proclaimed amongst us, have this twofold operation. God sent His Son to be the Saviour of the world. It was meant that His mission and message should only be for life, and that with ever-increasing abundance. But God cannot save men by magic, nor by indiscriminate bestowment of spiritual blessings. It is not in His power to force His salvation upon any one, and whether the Gospel shall turn out to be a man's salvation or his ruin depends on the man himself. The preaching of the gospel and your contact with it, if you have ever come into contact with it really and not by mere outward hearing, leaves no man as it found him. My poor words—and God knows how poor I feel them to be—leave none of you as they find you; and that is what makes our meeting together so solemn and awful, and sometimes weighs one down as with a sense of insufficiency for these things.

That twofold operation is seen first in the permanent effects of the Gospel upon character. If it has been offered to me, and if I accept it, then blessings beyond all enumeration, and which none but they who have them fully know, follow in its wake. Received by simple faith in Jesus Christ, God's sacrifice for a world's sin, it brings to us the clear consciousness of pardon, the calm sense of communion, the joyful spirit of adoption, righteousness rooted in our hearts and to be manifested day by day in our lives; it brings all elevation and strengthening and ennobling for the whole nature, and is the one power that makes us really men as God would have us all to be.

Rejected or neglected or passed by apparently without our having done anything in regard to it, what are the issues? What does it do? Well, it does this

for one thing, it turns unconscious worldliness into conscious worldliness. If the offer has been clearly before your minds, 'Christ or the world?' and you have said 'I take the world!' you know that you have made the choice, and the act will tell on your character.

Rejection strengthens all the evil motives for rejection, and adds to the insensibility of the man who has rejected. The ice on our pavements in the winter time, that melts on the surface in the day and freezes again at night, becomes dense and slippery beyond all other. And a heart, like that which beats in some of our bosoms, that has been melted and then has frozen again, is harder than ever it was before. Hammering that does not break solidifies and makes tougher the thing that is struck. There are no men so hard to get at as men and women, like multitudes of you, that have been hammered at by preaching ever since they were children, and have not yielded their hearts to God. The ark has done you hurt if it has not done you good.

I do not dwell upon the other solemn thought, of the harmful results of contact with a gospel which we do not accept, as exemplified in the increase of responsibility and the consequent increase of condemnation. I only quote Christ's words, 'The servant that knew his Lord's will, and did it not, shall be beaten with many stripes.'

My brother, Christ's gospel is never inert, one thing or other it does for every soul that it reaches. Either it softens or it hardens. Either it saves or it condemns. 'This Child is set for the rise or for the fall of many.' Jesus Christ may be for me and for you the Rock on which we build. If He is not, He is the Stone against which we stumble and break

our limbs. Jesus Christ may be for you and for me the Pillar that gives light by night to those on the one side; He either is that, or He is the Pillar that sheds darkness and dismay on those on the other. Jesus Christ and His Gospel may be to each of us 'the savour of life unto life'; He either is that, or He is 'the savour of death unto death.' Oh! dear friends, if you have neglected, turned away, delayed to receive Him or have forgotten impressions in the midst of the whirl of daily life, do not do so any longer. Take Him for yours, your Brother, Friend, Sacrifice, Inspirer, Lord, Aim, End, Reward, and very Heaven of Heaven. Take Him for your own by simple trusting; and say to Him 'Arise! O Lord, into Thy rest, Thou and the Ark of Thy strength.' So He will come into your hearts and smile His gladness as He whispers: 'Here will I dwell for ever; this is My rest, for I have desired it.'

THE PROMISED KING AND TEMPLE-BUILDER

'And it came to pass that night, that the word of the Lord came unto Nathan, saying, 5. Go and tell My servant David, Thus saith the Lord, Shalt thou build Me an house for Me to dwell in? 6. Whereas I have not dwelt in any house since the time that I brought up the children of Israel out of Egypt, even to this day, but have walked in a tent and in a tabernacle. 7. In all the places wherein I have walked with all the children of Israel spake I a word with any of the tribes of Israel, whom I commanded to feed My people Israel, saying, Why build ye not Me an house of cedar? 8. Now therefore so shalt thou say unto My servant David, Thus saith the Lord of hosts, I took thee from the sheepcote, from following the sheep, to be ruler over My people, over Israel: 9. And I was with thee whithersoever thou wentest, and have cut off all thine enemies out of thy sight, and have made thee a great name, like unto the name of the great men that are in the earth. 10. Moreover I will appoint a place for My people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own, and move no more; neither shall the children of wickedness afflict them any more, as beforetime, 11. And as since the time that I commanded judges to be over My people Israel, and have caused thee to rest from all thine enemies. Also the Lord telleth thee that He will make thee an house. 12. And when thy days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish His kingdom. 13. He shall build an house for My name; and I will establish the throne of His kingdom for ever. 14. I will be his father, and He shall be my son. If he commit iniquity, I will chasten Him with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men: 15. But My mercy shall not depart

away from Him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away before thee. 12. And thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever.'—2 SAMUEL vii. 4-16.

THE removal of the ark to Jerusalem was but the first step in a process which was intended to end in the erection of a permanent Temple. The time for the next step appeared to David to have come when he had no longer to fight for his throne. Rest from enemies should lead to larger work for God, else repose will be our worst enemy, and peace will degenerate into self-indulgent sloth. A devout heart will not be content with personal comfort and dwelling in a house of cedar, while the ark has but a tent for its abode. There should be a proportion between expenditure on self and on religious objects. How many professing Christians might go to school to David! Luxury at home and niggardliness in God's work make an ugly pair, but, alas! a common one.

Nathan approved, as was natural. But he knew the difference between his own thoughts and 'the word of the Lord' that came to him, and, like a true man, he went in the morning and contradicted, by God's authority, his own precipitate sanction of the king's proposal. Clearly, divine communications were unmistakably distinguishable from the recipient's own thoughts.

The divine message first negatives the intention to build a house. In 1 Chronicles a positive prohibition takes the place of the question in verse 5, but that is only a difference of form, for the question implies a negative answer. From David's last words (1 Chron. xxviii. 3) we learn that a reason for the prohibition was 'because thou art a man of war, and hast shed blood.' His wars were necessary, and tended to establish the kingdom, but their existence showed that the

time for building the Temple had not come, and there was a certain incongruity in a warrior king rearing a house for the God whose kingdom was in its essence peace.

The prohibition rests on a deep insight into the nature of Jehovah's reign, and draws a broad distinction between His worship and the surrounding paganism. But the reason given in the text is very remarkable. God did not desire a permanent Temple. If we may so say, He preferred the less solid Tabernacle, as corresponding better to the simplicity and spirituality of His worship. A gorgeous stone Temple might easily become the sepulchre, rather than the shrine, of true devotion. The movable tent answered to the temporary character of the 'dispensation.' The more fixed and elaborate the externals of worship, the more danger of the spirit being stifled by them. The Old Testament worship was necessarily ceremonial, but here is a caveat against the stiffening of ceremonial into stereotyped formalism.

The prohibition was accompanied by gracious and far-reaching promises, designed to assure David of God's approbation of his motive, and to open up to him the vision of the future and the wonders that should be. We need say little about the retrospective part of the message (verses 8, 9 a). God had been the agent in all David's past, had lifted him from the quiet following of his sheep, had given him rule, which was but a delegated authority. Israel was 'My people,' and therefore he was but an instrument in God's hand, and was not to govern by his own fancies or for his own advantage.

Every devout man's life is the realisation of a plan of God's, and we sin against ourselves as well as Him

if we do not often let thankful thoughts retrace all the way by which the Lord our God has led us.

With verse 9b the prophecy turns to the future. David personally is promised the continuance of God's help; then a permanent, peaceful possession of the land is promised to the nation, and finally the perpetuity of the kingdom in the Davidic line is promised. The prophecy as to the nation, like all such prophecies, is contingent on national obedience. The future of the kingdom will stand in blessed contrast with the wild times of the Judges, if—and only if—Israel behaves as 'My people' should.

But the main point of the prophecy is the promise to David's 'seed.' In form it attaches itself very significantly to David's intention to build a house for Jehovah. That would invert the true order, for Jehovah was about to build a house, that is, a permanent posterity, for David. God must first give before man can requite. All our relations to Him begin with His free mercy to us. And our building for Him should ever be the result of His building for us, and will, in some humble way, resemble the divine beneficence by which it has been quickened into action. The very foundation principles of Christian service are expressed here, in guise fitted to the then epoch of revelation.

But the relation of the two things, God's building and Solomon's, is not exhausted by such considerations. The consolidation of the monarchy in David's family was an essential preliminary to the rearing of the Temple. That work needed tranquil times, abundant resources, leisure, and assured dominion. So the prophet goes on to promise that David shall be succeeded by his 'seed,' who shall build the Temple.

Further, three great promises are given in reference to David's seed,—a perpetual kingdom, a personal relation of sonship to Jehovah, and paternal chastisement, if necessary, but no such departure of Jehovah's mercy as had darkened the close of Saul's sad reign. Then, finally, the assurance is reiterated of the perpetuity of David's house and throne. The remarkable expression in verse 16, 'established before thee' (that is, David), if it is the true reading, suggests a hint of the life after death, and conceives of the long-dead king as in some manner cognisant of the fortunes of his descendants. But the Septuagint reads 'before Me,' and that reading is confirmed by verses 26 and 29, and by Psalm lxxxix. 36*b*.

Now it is clear that these promises were in part directed to, and fulfilled in, Solomon. But it is as clear that the great promise of an eternal dominion, which is emphatically repeated thrice, goes far beyond him. We are obliged to recognise a second meaning in the prophecy, in accordance with Old Testament usage, which often means by 'seed' a line of successive generations of descendants. But no succession of mortal men can reach to eternal duration.

Apart from the fact that the kingdom, in the form in which David's descendants ruled over it, has long since crumbled away, the large words of the promise must be regarded as inflated and exaggerated, if by 'for ever' is only meant 'for long generations.' A 'seed,' or line of perishable men, can only last for ever if it closes in a Person who is not subject to the law of mortality. Unless we can with our hearts rejoicingly confess, 'Thou art the King of glory, O Christ! Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,' we do not pierce to the full understanding of Nathan's prophecy.

All the glorious prerogatives shadowed in it were but partially fulfilled in Israel's monarchs. Their failures and their successes, their sins and their virtues, equally declared them to be but shadowy forerunners of Him in whom all that they at the best imperfectly aimed at and possessed is completely and for ever fulfilled. They were prophetic persons by their office, and pointed on to Him.

He has built the true Temple, in that His body is the seat of sacrifice and of revelation, and the meeting-place of God and man, and inasmuch as through Him we are built up into a spiritual house for an habitation of God. In Him is fulfilled the great prophecy of 'My Servant the Branch,' who 'shall build the Temple of the Lord' and 'be a Priest upon His throne.' In Him, too, is fulfilled in highest truth the filial relationship. The Israelitish kings were by office sons of God. He is *the* Son in ineffable derivation and eternal unity of life with the Father, and their communion is in closest oneness of will and mutual interchange of love. In that filial relation lies the assurance of Christ's everlasting kingdom, for 'the Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into His hand.'

The prophecy is echoed in many places of Scripture, and is ever taken to refer to a single person. The angel of the annunciation moulded his salutation to the meek Virgin on it, when he declared that her Son 'shall be called the Son of the Most High: and the Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of His father David: and He shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of His kingdom there shall be no end.'

DAVID'S GRATITUDE

Then went king David in, and sat before the Lord, and he said, Who am I, O Lord God! and what is my house, that Thou hast brought me hitherto? 19. And this was yet a small thing in Thy sight, O Lord God; but Thou hast spoken also of Thy servant's house for a great while to come. And is this the manner of man, O Lord God? 20. And what can David say more unto Thee! for Thou, Lord God, knowest Thy servant. 21. For Thy word's sake, and according to Thine own heart, hast Thou done all these great things, to make Thy servant know them. 22. Wherefore Thou art great, O Lord God: for there is none like Thee, neither is there any God besides Thee, according to all that we have heard with our ears. 23. And what one nation in the earth is like Thy people, even like Israel, whom God went to redeem for a people to Himself, and to make Him a name, and to do for you great things and terrible, for Thy land, before Thy people, which Thou redeemedst out of Egypt, from the nations and their gods! 24. For Thou hast confirmed to Thyself Thy people Israel to be a people unto Thee for ever: and Thou, Lord, art become their God. 25. And now, O Lord God, the word that Thou hast spoken concerning Thy servant, and concerning his house, establish it for ever, and do as Thou hast said. 26. And let Thy name be magnified for ever, saying, The Lord of hosts is the God over Israel: and let the house of Thy servant David be established before Thee. 27. For Thou, O Lord of hosts, God of Israel, hast revealed to Thy servant, saying, I will build thee an house: therefore hath Thy servant found in his heart to pray this prayer unto Thee. 28. And now, O Lord God, Thou art that God, and Thy words be true, and Thou hast promised this goodness unto Thy servant: 29. Therefore now let it please Thee to bless the house of Thy servant, that it may continue for ever before Thee: for Thou, O Lord God, hast spoken it: and with Thy blessing let the house of Thy servant be blessed for ever.' —2 SAMUEL vii. 18-29.

God's promise by Nathan of the perpetuity of the kingdom in David's house made an era in the progress of revelation. A new element was thereby added to devout hope, and a new object presented to faith. The prophecy of the Messiah entered upon a new stage, bearing a relation, as its successive stages always did, to the history which supplies a framework for it. Now, for the first time, He can be set forth as the king of Israel; now the width of the promise, which at first embraced the seed of the woman, and then was limited to the seed of Abraham, and thereafter to the tribe of Judah, is still further limited to the house of David. The beam is narrowed as it is focussed into greater brilliance, and the personal Messiah begins to be faintly discerned in words which are to have a partial, preparatory fulfilment, in itself prophetic, in

the collective Davidic monarchs whose office is itself a prophecy. This passage is the wonderful burst of praise which sprang from David's heart in answer to Nathan's words. In many of the Psalms later than this prophecy we find clear traces of that expectation of the personal Messiah, which gradually shaped itself, under divine inspiration, in David, as contained in Nathan's message. But this thanksgiving prayer, which was the immediate reflection of the astounding new message, has not yet penetrated its depth nor discovered its rich contents, but sees in it only the promise of the continuance of kingship in his descendants. We do not learn the fulness of God's gracious promises on first hearing them. Life and experience and the teaching of His Spirit are needed to enable us to count our treasure, and we are richer than we know.

This prayer is a prose psalm outside the Psalter. It consists of two parts,—a burst of astonished thanksgiving and a stream of earnest petition, grasping the divine promise and turning it into a prayer.

I. Note the burst of thanksgiving (vs. 18-24). The ark dwelt 'in curtains,' and into the temporary sanctuary went the king with his full heart. The somewhat peculiar attitude of sitting, while he poured it out to God, has offended some punctilious commentators, who will have it that we should translate 'remained,' and not 'sat'; but there is no need for the change. The decencies of public worship may require a posture which expresses devotion: but individual communion is free from such externals, and absorbed contemplation naturally disposes of the body so as least to hinder the spirit. The tone of almost bewildered surprise at the greatness of the gift is strong all through the prayer. The man's breath is almost taken away, and his words

are sometimes broken, and throughout palpitating with emotion. Yet there is a plain progress of feeling and thought in them, and they may serve as a pattern of thanksgiving. Note the abrupt beginning, as if pent-up feeling forced its way, regardless of forms of devotion. The first emotion excited by God's great goodness is the sense of unworthiness. 'I do not deserve it,' is the instinctive answer of the heart to any lavish human kindness, and how much more to God's! 'I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies,' springs to the devout lips most swiftly, when gazing on His miracles of bestowing love. He must know little of himself, and less of God, who is not most surely melted down to contrition, which has no bitterness or pain in it, by the coals of loving fire heaped by God on his head.

The consciousness of unworthiness passes, in verse 19, to adoring contemplation of God's astounding mercy, and especially of the new element in Nathan's prophecy,—the perpetuity of the Davidic sovereignty in the dim, far-off future. Thankfulness delights to praise the Giver for the greatness of His gift. Faith strengthens its hold of its blessings by telling them over, as a miser does his treasure. To recount them to God is the way to possess them more fully.

The difficult close of the verse cannot be discussed here. 'The law for man' is nearer the literal meaning of the words than 'the manner of men' (Rev. Ver.); and, unfortunately, man's manner is not the same as man's law. But the usual explanations are unsatisfactory. We would hazard the suggestion that 'this' means that which God has spoken 'of thy servant's house,' and that to call it 'the law for man' is equivalent to an expression of absolute confidence in the authority, universality, and certain fulfilment of the

promise. The speech of God is ever the law for man, and this new utterance stands on a level with the older law, and shall rule all mankind. The king's faith not only gazes on the great words of promise, but sees them triumphant on earth.

Then in verse 20 comes another bend of the stream of praise. The more full the heart, the more is it conscious of the weakness of all words. The deepest praise, like the truest love, speaks best in silence. It is blessed when, in earthly relations, we can trust our dear ones' knowledge of us to interpret our poor words. It is more blessed when, in our speech to God, we can feel that our love and faith are deeper than our word, and that He does not judge them by it, but it by them.

‘Silence is His least injurious praise.’

Here, too, we may note the two instances, in this verse, of what runs through the whole prayer,—David's avoidance of using ‘I.’ Except in the lowly ‘What am I?’ at the beginning, it never occurs; but he calls himself ‘David’ twice and ‘Thy servant’ ten times,—a striking, because unconscious, proof of his lowly sense of unworthiness.

But he can say more; and what he does further say goes yet deeper than his former words. The personal aspect of the promise retreats into the background, and the ground of all God's mercy in His ‘own heart’ fills the thoughts. Some previous promise, perhaps that through Samuel, is referred to; but the great truth that God is His own motive, and that His love is not drawn forth by our deserts, but wells up by its own energy, like a perennial fountain, is the main thought of the verse. God is self-moved to bless, and He blesses that we may know Him through His gifts. The one thought is the central truth, level to our apprehension.

concerning His nature; the other is the key to the meaning of all His workings. All comes to pass because He loves with a self-originated love, and in order that we may know the motive and principle of His acts. We can get no farther into the secret of God than that. We need nothing more for peaceful acceptance of His providences for ourselves and our brethren. All is from love; all is for the manifestation of love. He who has learned these truths sits at the centre and lives in light.

Verse 22 strikes a new note. The effect of God's dealing with David is to magnify His name, to teach His incomparable greatness, and to confirm by experience ancient words which celebrate it. The thankful heart rejoices in hearsay being changed into personal knowledge. 'As we have heard, so have we seen.' Old truths flash up into new meaning, and only he who tastes and sees that God is good to him to-day really enters into the sweetness of His recorded past goodness.

Note the widening of David's horizon in verses 23 and 24 to embrace all Israel. His blessings are theirs. He feels his own relation to them as the culmination of the long series of past deliverances, and at the same time loses self in joy over Israel's confirmation as God's people by his kingship. True thankfulness regards personal blessings in their bearing on others, and shrinks from selfish use of them. Note, too, the parallel, if we may call it so, between Israel and Israel's God, in that 'there is none like Thee,' and by reason of its choice by this incomparable Jehovah, no nation on earth is like 'Thy people, even like Israel.'

Thus steadily does this model of thanksgiving climb up from a sense of unworthiness, through adoration and gazing on its treasures, to God's unmotivated love as His impulse, and men's knowledge of that love as

His aim, and pauses at last, rapt and hushed, before the solitary loftiness of the incomparable God, and the mystery of the love, which has intertwined the personal blessings which it celebrates, with its great designs for the welfare of the people, whose unique position corresponds to the unapproachable elevation of its God.

II. Verses 25 to 29 are prayer built on promise and winged by thankfulness. The whole of these verses are but the expansion of 'do as Thou hast said.' But they are not vain repetitions. Rather they are the outpourings of wondering thankfulness and faith, that cannot turn away from dwelling on the miracle of mercy revealed to it unworthy. God delights in the sweet monotony and persistence of such reiterated prayers, each of which represents a fresh throb of desire and a renewed bliss in thinking of His goodness. Observe the frequency and variety of the divine names in these verses,—in each, one, at least: Jehovah God (v. 25); Jehovah of hosts (v. 26); Jehovah of hosts, God of Israel (v. 27); Lord Jehovah (vs. 28, 29). Strong love delights to speak the beloved name. Each fresh utterance of it is a fresh appeal to His revealed nature, and betokens another wave of blessedness passing over David's spirit as he thinks of God. Observe, also, the other repetition of 'Thy servant,' which occurs in every verse, and twice in two of them. The king is never tired of realising his absolute subjection, and feels that it is dignity, and a blessed bond with God, that he should be His servant. The true purpose of honour and office bestowed by God is the service of God, and the name of 'servant' is a plea with Him which He cannot but regard. Observe, too, how echoes of the promise ring all through these verses, especially the phrases 'establish the house' and 'for ever.' They show how pro-

foundly David had been moved, and how he is labouring, as it were, to make himself familiar with the astonishing vista that has begun to open before his believing eyes. Well is it for us if we, in like manner, seek to fix our thoughts on the yet grander 'for ever' disclosed to us, and if it colours all our look ahead, and makes the refrain of all our hopes and prayers.

But the main lesson of the prayer is that God's promise should ever be the basis and measure of prayer. The mould into which our petitions should run is, 'Do as Thou hast said.' Because God's promise had come to David, 'therefore hath Thy servant found in his heart to pray this prayer unto Thee.'²¹ There is no presumption in taking God at His word. True prayer catches up the promises that have fallen from heaven, and sends them back again, as feathers to the arrows of its petitions. Nor does the promise make the prayer needless. We know that 'if we ask anything according to His will, He heareth us'; and we know that we shall not receive the promised blessings, which are according to His will, unless we do ask. Let us seek to stretch our desires to the width of God's promises, and to confine our wishes within their bounds.

DAVID AND JONATHAN'S SON

'And David said, Is there yet any that is left of the house of Saul, that I may shew him kindness for Jonathan's sake? 2. And there was of the house of Saul a servant whose name was Ziba. And when they had called him unto David, the king said unto him, Art thou Ziba? And he said, Thy servant is he. 3. And the king said, Is there not yet any of the house of Saul, that I may shew the kindness of God unto him? And Ziba said unto the king, Jonathan hath yet a son, which is lame on his feet. 4. And the king said unto him, Where is he? And Ziba said unto the king, Behold, he is in the house of Machir, the son of Ammiel, in Lo-debar. 5. Then king David sent, and fetched him out of the house of Machir, the son of Ammiel, from Lo-debar. 6. Now when Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan, the son of Saul, was come unto David, he fell on his face, and did reverence. And David said, Mephibosheth. And he answered, Behold thy servant! 7. And David said unto him, Fear not: for I will surely shew thee kindness for Jonathan thy father's

make, and will restore thee all the land of Saul thy father: and thou shalt eat bread at my table continually. 8. And he bowed himself, and said, What is thy servant, that thou shouldest look upon such a dead dog as I am? 9. Then the king called to Ziba, Saul's servant, and said unto him, I have given unto thy master's son all that pertained to Saul and to all his house. 10. Thou therefore, and thy sons, and thy servants, shall till the land for him, and thou shalt bring in the fruits, that thy master's son may have food to eat: but Mephibosheth thy master's son shall eat bread always at my table. Now Ziba had fifteen sons and twenty servants. 11. Then said Ziba unto the king, According to all that my lord the king hath commanded his servant, so shall thy servant do. As for Mephibosheth, said the king, he shall eat at my table, as one of the king's sons. 12. And Mephibosheth had a young son, whose name was Micha: and all that dwelt in the house of Ziba were servants unto Mephibosheth. 13. So Mephibosheth dwelt in Jerusalem: for he did eat continually at the king's table; and was lame on both his feet.—2 SAMUEL ix. 1-13.

THIS charming idyl of faithful love to a dead friend and generous kindness comes in amid stories of battle like a green oasis in a wilderness of wild rocks and sand. The natural sweetness and chivalry of David's disposition, which fascinated all who had to do with him, comes beautifully out in it, and it may well stand as an object-lesson of the great Christian duty of practical mercifulness.

I. So regarded, the narrative brings out first the motives of true kindliness. Saul and three of his four sons had fallen on the fatal field of Gilboa; the fourth, the weak Ishbosheth, had been murdered after his abortive attempt at setting up a rival kingdom had come to nothing. There were only left Saul's daughters and some sons by a concubine. So low had the proud house sunk, while David was consolidating his kingdom, and gaining victory wherever he went.

But neither his own prosperity, nor the absence of any trace of Saul's legitimate male descendants, made him forget his ancient oath to Jonathan. Years had not weakened his love, his sufferings at Saul's hands had not embittered it. His elevation had not lifted him too high to see the old days of lowliness, and the dear memory of the self-forgetting friend whose love had once been an honour to the shepherd lad. Jonathan's name had

been written on his heart when it was impressionable, and the lettering was as if 'graven on the rock for ever.' A heart so faithful to its old love needed no prompting either from men or circumstances. Hence the inquiry after 'any that is left of the house of Saul' was occasioned by nothing external, but came welling up from the depth of the king's own soul.

That is the highest type of kindness which is spontaneous and self-motived. It is well to be easily moved to beneficence either by the sight of need or by the appeals of others, but it is best to kindle our own fire, and be our own impulse to gracious thoughts and acts. We may humbly say that human mercy then shows likest God's, when, in such imitation as is possible, it springs in us, as His does in Him, from the depths of our own being. He loves and is kind because He is God. He is His own motive and law. So, in our measure, should we aim at becoming.

But David's remarkable language in his questions to Ziba goes still deeper in unfolding his motives. For he speaks of showing 'the kindness of God' to any remaining of Saul's house. Now that expression is no mere synonym for kindness exceeding great, but it unfolds what was at once David's deepest motive and his bright ideal. No doubt, it may include a reminiscence of the sacred obligation of the oath to Jonathan, but it hallows David's purposed 'mercy' as the echo of God's to him, and so anticipates the Christian teaching, 'Be ye merciful, even as your Father is merciful.' We must receive mercy from Him before our hearts are softened, so as to give it to others, just as the wire must be charged from the electric source before it can communicate the tingle and the light.

The best basis for the beneficent service of man is

experience of the mercy of God. Philanthropy has no roots unless it is planted in religion. That is a lesson which this age needs. And the other side of the thought is as true and needful; namely, that our 'religion' is not 'pure and undefiled' unless it manifests itself in the service of man. How serene and lofty, then, the ideal! How impossible ever to be too forgiving or too beneficent! 'As your heavenly Father is,'—that is our pattern. We have not shown our brother all the kindness which we owe him unless we have shown him 'the kindness of God.'

II. The progress of the story brings out next the characteristics of David's kindliness, and these may be patterns for us. Ziba does not seem to be very communicative, and appears a rather unwilling witness, who needs to have the truth extracted bit by bit. He evidently had nothing to do with Mephibosheth, and was quite content that he should be left obscurely stowed away across Jordan in the house of the rich Machir (2 Sam. xvii. 27-29). Lo-debar was near Mahanaim, on the eastern side of the river, where Ishbosheth's short-lived kingdom had been planted, and probably the population there still clung to Saul's solitary representative. There he lived so privately that none of David's people knew whether he was alive or dead. Perhaps the savage practice of Eastern monarchs, who are wont to get rid of rivals by killing them, led the cripple son of Jonathan to 'lie low,' and Ziba's reticence may have been loyalty to him. It is noteworthy that Ziba is not said to have been sent to bring him, though that would have been natural.

At any rate, Mephibosheth came, apparently dreading whether his summons to court was not his death-warrant. But he is quickly reassured. David again

recalls the dear memory of Jonathan, which was, no doubt, stirred to deeper tenderness by the sight of his helpless son ; but he swiftly passes to practical arrangements, full of common-sense and grasp of the case. The restoration of Saul's landed estate implies that it was in David's power. It had probably been 'forfeited to the crown,' as we in England say, or perhaps had been 'squatted on' by people who had no right to it. David, at any rate, will see that it reverts to its owner.

But what is a lame man to do with it? and will it be wise to let a representative of the former dynasty loose in the territory of Benjamin, where Saul's memory was still cherished? Apparently, David's disposition of affairs was prompted partly by consideration for Mephibosheth, partly by affection for Jonathan, and partly by policy. So Ziba, who had not been present, is sent for, and installed as overseer of the estate, to work it for his new master's benefit, while the owner is to remain at Jerusalem in David's establishment. It was prudent to keep Mephibosheth at hand. The best way to weaken a pretender's claims was to make a pensioner of him, and the best way to hinder his doing mischief was to keep him in sight.

But we need not suppose that this was David's only motive. He gratified his heart by retaining the poor young man beside himself, and, no doubt, sought to win his confidence and love. The recipient of his kindness receives it in characteristic Eastern fashion, with exaggerated words of self-depreciation, which sound almost too humble to be quite sincere. A little gratitude is better than whining professions of unworthiness.

And how did Ziba like his task? The singular remark

that he had 'fifteen sons and twenty servants' perhaps suggests that he was a person of some importance; and the subsequent one that 'all in his house were servants to Mephibosheth' may imply that neither they nor he quite liked their being handed over thus cavalierly.

But, however that may be, we may note that common-sense and practical sagacity should guide our mercifulness. Kindly impulses are good, but they need cool heads to direct them, or they do more harm than good. It is useless to set lame men to work an estate, even if they get a gift of it. And it is wise not to put untried ones in positions where they may plot against their benefactor. Mercifulness does not mean rash trust in its objects. They will often have to be watched very closely to keep them from going wrong. How many most charitable impulses have been so unwisely worked out that they have injured their objects and disappointed their subjects! We may note, too, in David's kindness, that it was prompt to make sacrifice, if, as is probable, he had become owner of the estate. The pattern of all mercy, who is God, has not loved us with a love which cost Him nothing. Sacrifice is the life-blood of service.

III. The subsequent history of Mephibosheth and Ziba is somewhat enigmatical. Usually the former is supposed to have been slandered by the latter, and to have been truly attached to David. But it is at least questionable whether Ziba was such a villain, and Mephibosheth such an injured innocent, as is supposed. This, at least, is plain, that Ziba demonstrated attachment to David at the time when self-love would have kept him silent. It took some courage to come with gifts to a discredited king (2 Sam. xvi. 1-4); and his allegation about his master has at least this support,

that the latter did not come with the rest of David's court to share his fortunes, and that the dream that he might fish to advantage in troubled waters is extremely likely to have occurred to him. Nor does it appear clear that, if Ziba's motive was to get hold of the estate, his adherence to David would have seemed, at that moment, the best way of effecting it.

If we look at the sequel (xix. 24-30) Mephibosheth's excuse for not joining David seems almost as lame as himself. He says that Ziba 'deceived him,' and did not bring him the ass for riding on, and therefore he could not come. Was there only one ass available in Jerusalem? and, when all David's *entourage* were streaming out to Olivet after him, could not he easily have got there too if he had wished? His demonstration of mourning looks very like a blind, and his language to David has a disagreeable ring of untruthfulness, in its extreme professions of humility and loyalty. 'Methinks the *cripple* doth protest too much.' David evidently did not feel sure about him, and stopped his voluble utterances somewhat brusquely: 'Why speakest thou any more of thy matters?' That is as much as to say, 'Hold your tongue.' And the final disposition of the property, while it gives Mephibosheth the benefit of the doubt, yet looks as if there was a considerable doubt in the king's mind.

We may take up the same somewhat doubting position. If he requited David's kindness thus unworthily, is it not the too common experience that one way of making enemies is to load with benefits? But no cynical wisdom of that sort should interfere with our showing mercy; and if we are to take 'the kindness of God' for our pattern, we must let our sunshine and rain fall, as His do, on 'the unthankful and the evil.'

'MORE THAN CONQUERORS THROUGH HIM'

'And the children of Ammon came out, and put the battle in array at the entering in of the gate: and the Syrians of Zoba, and of Rehob, and Ish-tob, and Maacah, were by themselves in the field. 9. When Joab saw that the front of the battle was against him before and behind, he chose of all the choice men of Israel, and put them in array against the Syrians: 10. And the rest of the people he delivered into the hand of Abishai his brother, that he might put them in array against the children of Ammon. 11. And he said, If the Syrians be too strong for me, then thou shalt help me: but if the children of Ammon be too strong for thee, then I will come and help thee. 12. Be of good courage, and let us play the men for our people, and for the cities of our God: and the Lord do that which seemeth Him good. 13. And Joab drew nigh, and the people that were with him, unto the battle against the Syrians: and they fled before him. 14. And when the children of Ammon saw that the Syrians were fled, then fled they also before Abishai, and entered into the city. So Joab returned from the children of Ammon, and came to Jerusalem. 15. And when the Syrians saw that they were smitten before Israel, they gathered themselves together. 16. And Hadarezer sent, and brought out the Syrians that were beyond the river: and they came to Helam: and Shobach the captain of the host of Hadarezer went before them. 17. And when it was told David, he gathered all Israel together, and passed over Jordan, and came to Helam. And the Syrians set themselves in array against David, and fought with him. 18. And the Syrians fled before Israel; and David slew the men of seven hundred chariots of the Syrians, and forty thousand horsemen, and smote Shobach the captain of their host, who died there. 19. And when all the kings that were servants to Hadarezer saw that they were smitten before Israel, they made peace with Israel, and served them. So the Syrians feared to help the children of Ammon any more.'—2 SAMUEL x. 8-19.

DAVID's growing power would naturally be regarded by neighbouring states as a menace. Success provokes envy, and in this selfish world strength usually encroaches on weakness, and weakness dreads strength. So it was quite according to the way of the world that David's friendly embassy to the king of Ammon should be suspected of covering hostile intentions. Those who have no kindness in their own hearts are slow to believe in kindness in others. 'What does he want to get by it?' is the question put by cynical 'shrewd men,' when they see a good man doing a gracious, self-forgetting act.

But the Ammonite courtiers need not have rejected David's overtures so insolently as by shaving half his ambassadors' beards and docking their robes. The insult meant war to the knife. Probably it was

deliberately intended as a declaration of hostilities, as it was immediately followed by the preparation of a formidable coalition against Israel. Possibly, indeed, the coalition preceded and occasioned the rejection of David's conciliatory message. But, in any case, the Ammonite king summoned his Syrian allies from a number of small states of which we barely know the names, the chief of which was Zobah.

That state had apparently started into prominence under its king Hadar-ezer, as he is called in this chapter, which is obviously a clerical error for Hadad-ezer, as in 2 Samuel viii. 3, etc. The name Hadad occurs again in Ben-hadad, and belonged to a Syrian god; so that the king of Zobah's name, meaning 'Hadad [is] help,' may be taken as the banner flaunted in the face of the army of Israel, and as making the war a struggle of the false against the true God.

The war with the same enemies narrated in 2 Samuel viii. 3-13 is now generally supposed to be the same as that recorded in the latter part of this passage. It certainly seems more probable that there has been some dislocation of the text, than that so crushing a defeat as that retold in chapter viii. should have been followed by a revival of the same coalition within a short time. If, however, there was such a revival, it may remind us of the conditions of all warfare for God and goodness, either in our own lives or in the world. Sins and vicious institutions, once defeated, have a terrible power of swift recovery. The thorns cut down sprout fast again. Let no man say, 'I have extirpated that sin from my nature,' for, if he does, it will surprise him when he is lulled in false security. Hadad-ezer is not so easily got rid of. He does not know when he is beaten.

David took the bull by the horns, and did not wait to

be attacked. It was good policy to carry the war into the enemies' country, as it generally is. God's soldiers have to be aggressive, and there is no better way of losing what they have won than by being contented with it. We must advance if we are not to retrograde. From 1 Chronicles we learn that the Ammonites had begun the campaign by besieging Medeba, a trans-Jordanic Israelitish city. The answer of Joab was to lay siege to Rabbath, the capital of Ammon, an almost impregnable fastness, perched on a cliff, and surrounded on all sides but one by steep ravines.

Apparently his bold strategy led to the abandonment of the attack on Medeba, and to the hurried march of its besiegers to relieve Rabbath. Probably the Syrian allies had been before Medeba, and suddenly appeared in Joab's rear. Their advance led the besieged to attempt a sortie, so that Joab was between two fires. It was a difficult position. Whichever foe he attacked, his retreat was cut off, and another enemy was ready to hurl itself on his rear. There was no time for manœuvring, and nothing for it but to face both assailants. So, without hesitation he made his dispositions. The new-comers, the Syrians, were evidently the more formidable, and Joab picked the best men to deal with them under his own command, while his brother Abishai was to give account of the Ammonites, who were pouring out of Rabbath. There is sometimes advantage in being 'Mr. Facing-both-ways.' We are often surrounded by allied evils or sins; for all our vices are kindred, and help each other, and all public or social iniquities are in league against the army of righteousness. We have to be many-sided in our attacks on what is wrong, as well as in our development of what is right.

Danger woke the best in Joab. Fierce and truculent as he often was, he had a hero's mettle in him, and in that dark hour he flamed like a pillar of light. His ringing words to his brother as they parted, not knowing if they would ever meet again, are like a clarion call. They extract encouragement out of the separation of forces, which might have depressed, and cheerily pledge the two divisions to mutual help. What was to happen, Joab, if the Syrians were too strong for thee, and the Ammonites for Abishai? That very possible contingency is not contemplated in his words. Rash confidence is unwise, but God's soldiers have a right to go into battle not anticipating utter defeat. Such expectation is apt to fulfil itself, and, on the other hand, to believe that we shall conquer goes a long way towards making us conquerors.

Does not Joab's pledge of mutual help carry in it a lesson applicable to all the divisions of God's great army? In the presence of the coalition of evil, is not the separation of the friends of good, madness? When bad men unite, should not good men hold together? The defeat or victory of one is the defeat or victory of all. We serve under the same banner, and, instead of shutting up our sympathies within the narrow limits of our own regiment, and even having a certain satisfaction at the difficulties into which another has got, we should feel that, if 'one member suffer, all the members suffer with it,' and should be ready to help all our fellow-soldiers who need help. Self-preservation as well as comradeship, and, above all, loyalty to Him for whom we fight, should lead to that; for, if Abishai is crushed, Joab will be in sorer peril.

His other word is equally pregnant. 'Be of good courage' is an exhortation always in season for Christ's

soldiers, for, whatever are their foes, 'He that is with them is more than they that are with' their enemies. One man with Christ to back him may always be sure of victory. Calculations of probabilities and of resources may often yield occasion for despondency if we calculate only what appears to sense, but if we bring Christ into the calculation we shall be of good cheer. 'The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?'

We may note, too, the stimulating motive drawn from the thought of what Israel's army fought for,— 'Our people, and the cities of our God.' Patriotism and devotion coalesced, and, like two contiguous flames in some duplex lamp, each made the other burn the brighter. So we may feel that we have the highest good of 'our people,' our brethren, in view, and that, in helping them and warring against evil, we are fighting for what belongs to God.

High courage, the effort to do their very best, and not to spare blood or life in the fight, blended nobly in Joab and his brother with recognition of God's supreme determination of the event. Nothing can stand before men who live and fight in such a temper as that. The early conquests of Mohammedanism were secured by just such a blending of courage and submission. These were vulgar and poor, compared with the victories that would attend a Church which was animated by these principles in the higher form in which Christianity presents them.

The account of the victory is remarkable. It is surely not by accident that no word is said about fighting. Note that it was as Joab 'drew nigh unto the battle' that the Syrians fled as if in sudden panic, and infected the Ammonites with their terror. We hear nothing of

men slain, or of any actual crossing of swords. Contrast verse 18, which tells of a real fight. It is, perhaps, not pressing omissions too far to suggest that the narrative favours the supposition of a bloodless victory. The dangers that often appal Christ's servants have a way of often disappearing when they are marched boldly up to. Like ghosts, they vanish when accosted.

So ended one campaign. But Hadad-ezer, the soul of the coalition, was not crushed, and the latter part of the passage tells of his renewed attempt. Partial defeat stirs up our foes to stronger struggles. The league was extended to include Syrian states farther east, and a still more formidable expedition was fitted out to attack this dangerous upstart king of Israel, who was casting his shadow so far. Such is always the case. We are never in more danger of fresh assailants than when we have won some victory over evil in ourselves or around us. David repeated his former tactics. Not waiting to be attacked, and to have the soil of Israel profaned and wasted by enemies, he crossed Jordan to meet the would-be invader, and, when he met him, struck hard, and crushed him and his host, slew the commander, and dispersed the thunder-cloud. The coalition broke down. Hadad-ezer's tributaries were glad to shake off his yoke and transfer their allegiance to David.

'Nothing succeeds like success.' The alliances between worldly men banded against God's soldiers are held together by self-interest, and, when that can be best secured by deserting a man when he is down, away go all the allies, tumbling over each other in their haste to be the first to desert and bring feigned submission to the conqueror. The jackals leave the sick lion. The Syrians had had enough of helping Ammon, and

Rabbath might fall without their lifting a finger. So hollow are the world's coalitions against God and His anointed!

THOU ART THE MAN

'And David said to Nathan, As the Lord liveth, the man that hath done this thing shall surely die; because he did this thing, and because he had no pity. And Nathan said to David, Thou art the man.'—2 SAMUEL xii. 5-7.

NATHAN'S apologue, so tenderly beautiful, takes the poet-king on the most susceptible side of his character. All his history shows him as a man of wonderfully sweet, chivalrous, generous, swiftly compassionate nature. And so, when he hears the story of a mean, heartless selfishness, all that is best in him kindles into a generous indignation, and flames out into instinctive condemnation. 'The man that did this thing shall die because he had no pity.'

And then, on to that hot fervour of righteous wrath, comes this dash of cold water, 'And Nathan said to David, Thou art the man.' Like some keen spear-point, sharpened almost to invisibility, this short sentence (two words in the original) driven by a strong hand, goes right through the armour to the very heart. What a collapse there would be in the king when the pointed forefinger of the prophet emphasised and drove home the application!

I. This dramatic scene before us may be taken as suggesting first that we are all strangely blind to our own faults.

If a man's own sin is held up before him a little disguised, he says, 'How ugly it is!' And if only for a moment he can be persuaded that it is not his own conduct but some other sinner's that he is judging, the

instinctive condemnation comes. We have two sets of names for vices: one set which rather mitigates and excuses them, and another set which puts them in their real hideousness. We keep the palliative set for home consumption, and liberally distribute the plain-spoken, ugly set amongst the vices and faults of our friends. The same thing which I call in myself prudence I call in you meanness. The same thing which you call in yourselves generous living, you call in your friend filthy sensualism. That which, to the doer of it, is only righteous indignation, to the onlooker is passionate anger. That which, in the practiser of it, is no more than a due regard for the interests of his own family and himself in the future, is, to the envious lookers-on, shabbiness and meanness in money matters. That which, to the liar, is only prudent diplomatic reticence, to the listener is falsehood. That which, in the man that judges his own conduct, is but 'a choleric word,' is, in his friend, when he judges him, 'flat blasphemy.'

And so we go all round the circle, and condemn our own vices, when we see them in other people. So the king who had never thought, when he stole away Uriah's one ewe lamb, and did him to death by traitorous commands, setting him in the front of the battle, that he was wanting in compassion, blazes up at once, and righteously sentences the other 'man' to death, 'because he had no pity.' He had never thought of himself or of his crime as cruel, as mean, as selfish, as heartless. But when he sees a partially disguised picture of it he knows it for the devil's child that it is.

'O wad some Power the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us !
It wad frae mony a blunder free us,'

and so it would. to see ourselves as we see others. We

judge our brother and ourselves by two different standards.

And that is only one phase of a more general principle, one case that comes under a yet wider law, viz. that we are all blind, strangely blind, to our own faults. Why that is so I do not need to spend time in inquiring, except for a distinctly practical purpose. Let me just remind you how a strong wish for a thing that seems desirable always tends to confuse to a man the plain distinction between right and wrong; and how passions once excited, or the animal lusts and desires once kindled in a man, go straight to their object without the smallest regard to whether that object is to be reached by the breach of all laws, human and divine, or not. Excite any passion, and the passion is but a blind propensity towards certain good, and takes no question or consideration of whether right or wrong is involved at all.

And further, habit familiarises with evil and diminishes our sense of it as evil. A man that has been for half a day in some ill-ventilated room does not notice the poisonous atmosphere; if you go into it you are half suffocated at first, and breathe more easily as you get used to it. A man can live amidst the foulest poison of evil; and, as the Styrian peasants get fat upon arsenic, his whole nature may seem to thrive by the poison that it absorbs. They tell us that the breed of fish that live in the lightless caverns in the bowels of some mountains, by long disuse have had their eyes atrophied out of them, and are blind because they have lived out of the light. And so men that live in the love of evil lose the capacity of discerning the evil, and 'he that walketh in darkness' becomes blind, blind to his sin, and blind to all the realities of life.

Then is it not true, too, that many of us systematically and of set purpose, continually avoid all questions as to the moral nature of our conduct? How many a man and woman who reads these words never sits down to think whether what they have been doing is right or wrong, because they have deep down in their consciences an uneasy suspicion as to what the answer would be. So, by reason of fostering passion, by reason of listening to wishes, by reason of the habit of wrongdoing, by reason of the systematic avoidance of all careful investigation of our character and of our conduct, we lose the power of fairly deciding upon the nature of our own acts.

Then self-love comes in, and still another thing tends to blind us. We are all ready to acquiesce in the general indictment, and so to shirk the particular application of it. That is what people do about all great moral principles that ought to affect conduct,—they admit them in words, as general truths applying to mankind, and then hide themselves in the crowd, and think that they escape the incidence and particular application of the truths. No one of us would, I suppose, venture in plain words to stand up and say: ‘I am an exception to your general confessions of sin,’ and most of us would be ready to unite in the acknowledgment: ‘We have all come short of the glory of God,’ though in our consciences there has never stirred the faintest movement of self-condemnation even whilst our lips have been uttering the confession. Do not shrink away in the crowd, my brother! Come out to the front, and stand by yourself as God sees you, isolated. Look at your own actions; never mind about other men’s. Do not content yourselves with saying, ‘*We have sinned*’; say, ‘*I have sinned against Thee.*’ God and you are as

if alone in the universe. 'Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned.' There are no crowds in God's eyes; He deals with single souls. Every one of us,—thou, and thou, and thou,—must give account of himself to God.

II. In the next place, let me ask you to think how this story suggests that the true work of God's message is to tear down the veil and to show the ugly thing.

'Nathan said unto David, Thou art the man.' It needed a prophet to do that, with divine authority. Nothing less would suffice to get through the thick bosses of the buckler of self-conceit and ignorance which he had to penetrate. As God's messenger, he gathered up, as I said, into one sharp-pointed, keen-edged, steel-bright sentence, the very spirit of the whole ancient Law, which seeks to individualise the sinner, and to drive home to the conscience the consciousness of wrong-doing.

The remarks that I have been making, in the former part of this sermon, imperfect as they must necessarily be, may at least serve one or two purposes in reference to this part of my discourse.

It seems to me that if what I have been saying as to a man's blindness to his own true moral character be at all correct, there flows from that thought a strong presumption in favour of a divine revelation. We need another than our own voice to lay down the law of conduct, and to accuse and condemn the breaches of it. Conscience is not a wholly reliable guide, and is neither an impartial nor an all-knowing judge. Unconsciousness of evil is not innocence. It is not the purest of women who 'wipes her mouth and says, I have done no harm.' My conscience says to me, 'It is wrong to do wrong'; but when I say to my conscience, 'Yes, and pray what is wrong?' a large variety of

answers is possible. A man may sophisticate his conscience, or bribe his conscience, or throttle his conscience, or sear his conscience. And so the man who is worst, who, therefore, ought to be most chastised by his conscience, has most immunity from it, and where, if it is to be of use, it ought to be most powerful, there it is weakest.

What then? Why this, then—a standard that varies is not a standard; we are left with a leaden rule. My conscience, your conscience, is like the standard measures which we at present possess, which by their very names—foot, handbreadth, nail, and the like, tell us that they were originally but the length of one man's limb. And so your measure of right and wrong, and another man's measure, though they may substantially correspond, yet differ according to your differences of education, character, and a thousand other things. So that the individual man's standard needs to be rectified. You have to send all the weights and measures up to the Tower now and then, to get them stamped and certified. And, as I believe, this fluctuation of our moral judgments shows the need for a fixed pattern and firm unchangeable standard, external to our mutable selves. A light on deck which pitches with the pitching ship is no guide. It must flash from a white pillar founded on a rock and immovable amid the restless waves. Our need of such a standard raises a strong presumption that a good God will give us what we need, if He can. Such a standard He has given, as I believe, in the revelation of Himself which lies in this book, and culminates in the life and character of Jesus Christ our Lord. There, and by that, we can set our watches. There we can read the law of morality, and by our deflections from it we can measure the amount of our guilt.

But beyond that, the remarks which I have already made in the former part of my sermon may suggest to us, along with this utterance of the prophet's, that one indispensable characteristic and certain criterion of a true message and gospel from God is that it pierces the conscience and kindles the sense of sin. My dear brethren, there is a great deal of so-called Christian teaching, both from pulpits and books in this day, which, to my mind, is altogether defective by reason of its underestimate of the cardinal fact of sin, and its consequent failure to represent the fundamental characteristic of the gospel as being deliverance and redemption. I am quite sure that the root of nine-tenths of all the heresies that have ever afflicted the Christian Church, and of the weakness of so much popular Christianity, is none other than this failure adequately to recognise the universality and the gravity of the fact of transgression. If a word comes to you, calls itself God's message, and does not start with man's sin, nor put in the forefront of its utterances the way by which the dominion of that sin in your own heart can be broken, and the penalties of that sin in your present and future life can be swept away, it is condemned, *ipso facto*, as not a gospel from God, or fit for man. O my brother! it sounds harsh; but it is the truest kindness, when Nathan stands before the king, and with his flashing eye and stern, calm voice says, 'Thou art the man.' Was not that nobler, truer, tenderer, worthier of God, than if he had smoothed David down with soft speeches that would not have roused his conscience? Is it not the truest benevolence that keeps the surgeon's hand steady whilst his heart is touched by the pain that he inflicts, as he thrusts his gleaming instrument of tender cruelty into the poisonous sore? And are not

God's mercy and love manifest for us in this, that He begins all His work on us with the grave, solemn indictment of each soul by itself, 'Thou art the man'?

'He showed me all the mercy,
For He taught me all the sin.'

III. Lastly, let me say that God accuses us and condemns us one by one that He may save us one by one.

The meaning of Nathan's sharp sentence was speedily disclosed when the broken-down king exclaimed, 'I have sinned against the Lord,' and when, with laconic force as great as that which barbed the condemnation, the prophet stanching the wound with the brief words, 'And the Lord hath made to pass the iniquity of thy sin.' The intention of the accusation is the extension of the mercy and forgiveness. God, as the Apostle puts it, 'hath concluded all in unbelief, that He might have mercy upon all.'

And now, mark, for the carrying out of that divine purpose in regard to us, and for our possession of the proffered mercy, the same individualising and isolating process is needful as was needful for the conviction of the sin. God desires to save the world, but God can only save men one at a time. There must be an individual access to Him for the reception of forgiveness, as there must be in regard to the conviction of sin, just as if He and I were the only two beings in the whole universe. There is no wholesale entrance into God's Church or into God's kingdom. God's mercy is not given to crowds, except as composed of individuals who have individually received it. There must be the personal act of faith; there must be my solitary coming to Him. As the old mystics used to define prayer, so I might define the whole process by which men are saved from their sins, 'the flight of the

lonely soul to the lonely God.' My brother, it is not enough for you to say, 'We have sinned'; say, 'I have sinned.' It is not enough that from a gathered congregation there should go up the united litany, 'Lord, have mercy upon us! Christ, have mercy upon us! Lord, have mercy upon us!' You must make the prayer your own: 'Lord, have mercy upon *me*!' It is not enough that you should believe, as I suppose most of you fancy that you believe, that Christ has died for the sins of the whole world. That belief will give you no share in His forgiveness. You must come to closer grips with Him than that; and you must be able to say, 'Who loved *me*, and gave Himself for *me*.' Let us have no running away into the crowd. Come out, and stand by yourselves, and for yourselves stretch out your own hand, and take Christ for yourselves.

A man may die of starvation in a granary. You may be lost in the midst of this abundance which Christ has provided for you. And the difference between really possessing salvation and not possessing it, lies very largely in the difference between saying 'us' and 'me.' 'Thou art the man' in regard to the general accusation of sin; 'Thou art the man' in regard to the solemn law which proclaims that 'the soul that sinneth it shall die'; and, blessed be God, 'Thou art the man' in regard to the great promise that says, 'If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink.' Christ gives you a blank cheque in His word: 'Whoso cometh unto Me, I will in no wise cast out.' Write thine own name in, and by thy personal faith in the Lamb of God that died for thee, thy sins shall pass away: and all the fulness of God shall be thy very own for ever. 'If thou be wise, thou shalt be wise for thyself, and if thou scornest, thou alone shall bear it.'

DAVID AND NATHAN

'And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the Lord. And Nathan said unto David, The Lord also hath put away thy sin.'—2 SAMUEL xii. 13.

WE ought to be very thankful that Scripture never conceals the faults of its noblest men. High among the highest of them stands the poet-king. Whoever, for nearly three thousand years, has wished to express the emotions of trust in God, longing after purity, aspiration, and rapture of devotion, has found that his words have been before him.

And this man sins; black, inexcusable, aggravated transgression. You know the shameful story; I need not tell it over again. The Bible gives it us in all its naked ugliness, and there are precious lessons to be got out of it; such, for instance, as that it is not innocence that makes men good. '*This is the man after God's own heart!*' people sneer. Yes! Not because saints have a peculiar morality, and atone for adultery and murder by making or singing psalms, but because, having fallen into foul sin, he learned to abhor it, and with many tears, with unconquerable resolution, with deepened trust in God, set his face once more to press toward the mark. That is a lesson worth learning.

And, again, David was not a hypocrite because he thus fell. All sin is inconsistent with devotion; but, thank God, we cannot say how much or how dark the sin must be which is incompatible with devotion, nor how much evil there may still lurk and linger in a heart of which the main set and aspiration are towards purity and God.

And, again, the worst transgressions are not the passionate outbursts contradictory of the main direc-

tion of a life which sometimes come; but the habitual, though they be far smaller, evils which are honey-combing the moral nature. White ants will pick a carcase clean sooner than a lion. And many a man who calls himself a Christian, and thinks himself one, is in far more danger, from little pieces of chronic meanness in his daily life, or sharp practice in his business, than ever David was in his blackest evil.

But the main lesson of all is that great and blessed one of the possibility of any evil and sin, like this black one, being annihilated and caused to pass away through repentance and confession. It is to that aspect of our text that I turn, and ask you to look with me at the three things that come out of it: David's penitence; David's pardon consequent upon his penitence; and David's punishment, notwithstanding his penitence and pardon.

I. First, then, the penitence.

What a divine simplicity there is in the words of our text: 'David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the Lord.' That is all. In the original, two words are enough to revolutionise the man's whole life, and to alter all his relations to the divine justice and the divine Friend. 'I have sinned against the Lord.' Not an easy thing to say; and as the story shows us, a thing that David took a long time to mount up to.

Remember the narrative. A year has passed since his transgression. What sort of a year has it been? One of the Psalms tells us, 'When I kept silence my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long; for day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me; my moisture was turned into the drought of summer.' There were long months of sullen silence, in which a clear apprehension and a torturing experience of divine

disapprobation, like a serpent's fang, struck poison into his veins. His very physical frame seems to have suffered. His heart was as dry as the parched grass upon the steppes. That was what he got by his sin. A moment of turbid animal delight, and long days of agony; dumb suffering in which the sense of evil had not yet broken him down into a rain of sweet tears, but lay, like a burning consciousness, within his heart.

And then came the prophet with his parable, so tender, so ingenious, so powerful. And the quick flash of generous indignation, which showed how noble the man was after all, with which he responded to the picture, unknowing that it was a picture of his own dastardly conduct, led on to the solemn words in which Nathan tore away the veil; and with a threefold lever, if I may so say, overthrew the toppling structure of his impenitence.

First of all, and most chiefly, he seeks to win him to repentance by a picture of God's great love and goodness. 'I have done this and that and the other thing for thee. What hast thou done for Me?' Ah, that is the true beginning. You cannot frighten men into penitence, you may frighten them into remorse; and the remorse may or may not lead on to repentance. But bring to bear upon a man's heart the thought of the infinite and perfect love of God, and that is the solvent of all his obstinate impenitence, and melts him to cry, 'I have sinned.' And along with that element there is the other, the plain striking away of all disguises from the ugly fact of the sin. The prophet gives it its hideous name, and that is one element in the process which leads to true repentance. For so strange and subtle are the veils which we cast over our own evils, that it comes sometimes to us with a snock

and a start when some word, that we know to connote wickedness of the deepest dye, is applied to them. David had very likely so sophisticated his conscience that, though he had been writhing under the sense that he was a wrongdoer, it came to him with a kind of ugly surprise when the naked words 'adultery' and 'murder' were pressed up against his consciousness.

And the third element that brought him to his senses, and to his knees, was the threatening of punishment, which is salutary when it follows these other two, the revelation of a divine love and the unveiling of the essential nature of my own act; but which without these is but 'the hangman's whip' to which only inferior natures will respond. And these three, the appeal to God's love, the revelation of his own sin, the solemn warning of its consequences—these three brought to bear upon David's heart, broke him down into a passion of penitence in which he has only the two words to say, 'I have sinned against the Lord.' That is all. That is enough.

And what is it? It is the recognition—which is essential to all real penitence—that I have not merely broken some impersonal law, or done something that hurts my fellows, but that I have broken the relations which I ought to sustain to a living, loving Person, who is God. We commit crimes against society, we commit faults against one another, we commit sins against God, and the very notion of sin involves, as its correlative, the thought of the divine Lawgiver.

So, dear brethren, penitence goes deeper than a recognition of demerit and unworthiness. It is more than an acknowledgment of imperfection and breach of morality. It is something different altogether from the acknowledgment that I have committed a fault

against my fellow. David had done Bathsheba and Uriah, and in them his whole kingdom, foul wrong, but, as he says in Psalm li., 'Against Thee, Thee *only*, have I *sinned*.' His account with these is of a less grave character, but 'against Thee I sinned.'

And in like manner, this penitence contains in it the recognition of transgression against a loving Friend and Father, which had been brought home to his mind by all the words of the rebuking prophet, who was a kind of incarnate conscience for him now. And it contains, still further, confession to God against whom he had sinned. The first impulse of a man when he dimly discerns how far he has departed from God's law, is that which the old story represents was the first impulse of the first sinners—to hide himself in the trees of the garden. The second impulse is to go to Him against whom we have sinned, and who only therefore can deal with the sin in the way of forgiveness, and to pour it all out before Him. Once an Apostle, when he caught a partial glimpse of his own demerit and transgression, said to the Master with a natural impulse, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!' But Peter had a deeper sense of his own sin, and a happier knowledge of what Christ could do for his sin, when his brother Apostle whispering to him in the boat, 'It is the Lord,' the traitor Apostle cast himself into the shallow water and floundered through it anyhow, to get as close as he could to the Master's feet.

Do not go away from God because you feel that you have sinned against Him. Where should you go but to your mother's bosom, and hide your face there, if you have committed faults against her? Where should you go but to God if against Him you have transgressed? Look, my brother, at your own character

and conduct; measure the deficiencies and imperfections, the transgressions and faults; ay! perhaps with some of you, the crimes against men and society and human laws; but see beneath all these a deeper thought; and stifle not the words that would come to your lips as a relief, like a surgeon's lancet struck into some foul gathering, 'I have sinned against the Lord.'

II. And now, secondly, notice with me David's pardon consequent upon his repentance.

Can there be anything more striking—I do not say dramatic, for the circumstances are far too serious for terms of art—can there be anything more in the nature of a gospel to us all than that brief dialogue? David said unto Nathan, 'I have sinned against the Lord.' And Nathan said unto David, 'The Lord also hath put away thy sin.'

Immediate forgiveness, that is the first lesson that I would press upon you. Dear brethren, it is an experience which you may each repeat in your own history at this moment. It needs but the confession in order that the forgiveness should come. At this end of the telephone whisper your confession, and before it has well passed your lips there comes back the voice sweet as that of angels, 'The Lord hath forgiven thy sin.' One word, one motion of a heart aware of, and hating, and desiring to escape from, its evil, brings with a rush the whole fulness of fatherly and forgiving love into any heart. And that one confession may be the turning-point of a man's life, and may obliterate all the sinful past, and may bring him into loving, reconciled, harmonious relations with the Almighty Judge.

Learn, too, not only the immediacy of the answer and the simplicity of the means, but learn how thorough

and complete God's dealing with your sin may be. The original language of my text might be rendered, 'The Lord hath caused thy sin to pass away'; the thought being substantially that of some impediment or veil between man and Him which, with a touch of His hand, He dissolves as it were into vapour, and so leaves all the sky clear for His warmth and sunshine to pour down upon the heart. We do not need to enter upon theological language in talking about this great gift of forgiveness. It means substantially that howsoever you and I have piled up mountain upon mountain, Alp upon Alp, of our evils and transgressions, all pass away and become non-existent. Another word of the Old Testament expresses the same idea when it speaks about sin being 'covered.' Another word expresses the same idea when it speaks about God as 'casting' men's sins 'into the depths of the sea'—all meaning this one thing, that they no longer stand as barriers between the free flow of His love and our poor hearts. He takes away the sense of guilt, touches the wounded conscience, and there is healing in His hand. As, according to the old belief, the sovereign, by laying his hand upon sufferers from 'the King's evil' healed them and cleansed them, so the touch of His forgiving love takes away the sense of guilt and heals the spirit. He removes all the impediments between His love and us. His love can now come undisturbed. His deepest and solemnest judgments do not need to come; and no more does there stand frowning between us and Him the spectre of our past.

→ People tell us that forgiveness is impossible, 'that whatsoever a man soweth, that must he also reap'; that law is law, and that the consequences cannot be averted. That is all quite true if there is not a

God. It is not true if there is; and if there is no God, there is no sin. So if there is a God, there is forgiveness.

Consequences, as I shall have to show you in a moment, may still remain, but pardon may be ours all the same. When you forgive your child, does it mean that you do not thrash it, or does it mean that you take it to your heart? And when God pardons, does it mean that He waives His laws, or does it mean that He lets us come into the whole warmth and sunshine of His love? Will you go there?

Forgiveness was to Jews a thing difficult to apprehend. It was hard for them to understand the harmony of it with the rigid retribution on which their whole system of religion reposed. But you and I have come further into the light than Nathan and David had. And I have to preach a modification of the words of my text which is not a limitation of them, but the unveiling of their basis and the surest confirmation of them, when I say 'In Him'—Jesus Christ—'we have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of sins.'

The New Testament teaches us that the Cross of Christ threw its power back upon former transgressions as well as forward upon future ones; and that in Him past ages, though they knew Him not, received remission. Christ is the Medium of the divine forgiveness; Christ's Cross is the ground of the divine pardon; Christ's sacrifice is the guarantee for us that the sin which He has borne He has borne away. 'By His stripes we are healed.' 'Wherefore, men and brethren, be it known unto you, that through this Man is preached unto us the forgiveness of *our* sins.'

III. Third and lastly, look at the punishment which

follows—shall I say *notwithstanding* or *because of*?—the penitence and the pardon.

In David's life there came the immediate retribution in kind, which was signalised as such by the divine message—the death of the child 'who was conceived in sin and shapen in iniquity.' But beyond that, look at David's life after his great fall. There was no more brightness in it. His own sin and example of lust loosed the bonds of morality in his household, and his son followed his example and improved upon it. And from that came Absalom's murder of his brother, and from that Absalom's exile, and from that Absalom's rebellion, and from that Absalom's death, which nearly killed his poor old father. And for all the rest of his days his home was troubled, and his last years ended with the turmoil of a disputed succession before his eyes were closed, all traceable to this one foul crime.

Joab was the torment of David's later days, and Joab's power over him depended upon his having been the instrument of Uriah's murder; and so the master of the king, whose bidding he had done. Ahithophel was the brain of Absalom's conspiracy. His defection struck a sharp arrow into David's heart—'mine own familiar friend in whom I trusted.' He evidently hated the king with fierce hatred. He was Bathsheba's grandfather; and we are not going wrong, I think, in tracing his passionate hatred, and the peculiar form of insult which he counselled Absalom to adopt, to the sense of foul wrong which had been done to his house by David's crime.

And so all through his days this poor old king had to do what you and I have to do—to bear the temporal results of sin. 'Be not deceived, God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap'

So 'of our pleasant vices the gods make whips to scourge us' And it is in mercy that we have to drink as we have brewed, that we have to lie upon the beds that we have made; that in regard to outward consequences, and in regard to our own hearts and inward history, we are the architects of our own fortunes, and cannot escape the penalties of our sins and of our faults. Better to have it so than be cursed with impunity!

Some of you young men are sowing diseases in your bones that will either make you invalids or will kill you before your time. All of us are bearing about with us, in some measure and sense, the issues, which are the punishments, of our evil. Let us thank Him and take up the praise of the old psalm, 'Thou wast a God that forgivest them, though Thou tookest vengeance of their inventions.' There is either merciful chastisement here, that we may be parted from our sins, or there is judgment hereafter.

O my brother! let me beseech you, do not commit the suicide of impenitence, but go to Christ, in whom all our sins are taken away, and lay your hands on the head of that great Sacrifice, and 'the Lord shall cause to pass the iniquity of your sin.'

GOD'S BANISHED ONES

'God doth devise means, that His banished be not expelled from Him.

2 SAMUEL xiv. 14.

DAVID's good-for-nothing son Absalom had brought about the murder of one of his brothers, and had fled the country. His father weakly loved the brilliant blackguard, and would fain have had him back. but was restrained by a sense of kingly duty. Joab, the astute

commander-in-chief, a devoted friend of David, saw how the land lay, and formed a plan to give the king an excuse for doing what he wished to do. So he got hold of a person who is called 'a wise woman' from the country, dressed her as a mourner, and sent her with an ingeniously made-up story of how she was a widow with two sons, one of whom had killed the other, and of how the relatives insisted on their right of avenging blood, and demanded the surrender of the murderer; by which, as she pathetically said, 'the coal' that was left her would be 'quenched.' The king's sympathy was quickly roused—as was natural in so impulsive and poetic a nature—and he pledged his word, and finally his oath, that the offender should be safe.

So the woman has him in a trap, having induced him to waive justice and to absolve the guilty by an arbitrary act. Then she turns upon him with an application to his own case, and bids him free himself from the guilt of double measures and inconsistency by doing with his banished son the same thing—viz. abrogating law and bringing back the offender. In our text she urges still higher considerations—viz. those of God's way of treating criminals against His law, of whom she says that He spares their lives, and devises means—or, as the words might perhaps be rendered, 'plans plannings'—by which He may bring them back. She would imply that human power and sovereignty are then noblest and likest God's when they remit penalties and restore wanderers.

I do not further follow the story, which ends, as we all know, with Absalom's ill-omened return. But the wise woman's saying goes very deep, and, in its picturesque form, may help to bring out more vividly

some truths—all-important ones—of which I wish to beg your very earnest consideration and acceptance.

I. Note, then, who are God's banished ones.

The woman's words are one of the few glimpses which we have of the condition of religious thought amongst the masses of Israel. Clearly she had laid to heart the teaching which declared the great, solemn, universal fact of sin and consequent separation from God. For the 'banished ones' of whom she speaks are no particular class of glaring criminals, but she includes within the designation the whole human race, or, at all events, the whole Israel to which she and David belonged. There may have been in her words—though that is very doubtful—a reference to the old story of Cain after the murder of his brother. For that narrative symbolises the consequences of all evil-doing and evil-loving, in that he was cast out from the presence of God, and went away into a 'land of wandering,' there to hide from the face of the Father. On the one hand, it was banishment; on the other hand, it was flight. So had Absalom's departure been, and so is ours.

Strip away the metaphor, dear brethren, and it just comes to this thought, which I seek to lay upon the hearts of all my hearers now—you cannot be blessedly and peacefully near God, unless you are far away from sin. If you take two polished plates of metal, and lay them together, they will adhere. If you put half a dozen tiny grains of sand or dust between them, they will fall apart. So our sins have come between us and our God. They have not separated God from us, blessed be His name! for His love, and His care, and His desire to bless, His thought, and His know-

ledge, and His tenderness, all come to every soul of man. But they have rent us apart from Him, in so far as they make us unwilling to be near Him, incapable of receiving the truest nearness and blessedness of His presence, and sometimes desirous to hustle Him out of our thoughts, and, if we could, out of our world, rather than to expatiate in the calm sunlight of His presence.

That banishment is self-inflicted. God spurns away no man, but men spurn Him, and flee from Him. Many of us know what it is to pass whole days, and weeks, and years, as practical Atheists. God is not in all our thoughts.

And more than that, the miserable disgrace and solitude of a soul that is godless in the world is what many of us like. The Prodigal Son scraped all his goods together, and thought himself freed from a very unwelcome bondage, and a fine independent youth, when he went away into 'the far country.' It was not quite so pleasant when provisions and clothing fell short, and the swine's trough was the only table that was spread before him. But yet there are many of us, I fear, who are perfectly comfortable away from God, in so far as we can get away from Him, and who never are aware of the degradation that lies in a soul's having lowered itself to this, that it had rather not have God inconveniently near.

Away down in the luxurious islands of the Southern Sea you will find degraded Englishmen who have chosen rather to cast in their lot with savages than to have to strain and work and grow. These poor beach-combers of the Pacific, not happy in their degradation, but wallowing in it, are no exaggerated pictures of the condition, in reality, of thousands of

us who dwell far from God, and far therefore from righteousness and peace.

II. Notice God's yearning over His banished ones.

The woman in our story hints at, or suggests, a parallel which, though inadequate, is deeply true. David was Absalom's father and Absalom's king; and the two relationships fought against each other in his heart. The king had to think of law and justice; the father cried out for his son. The young man's offence had neither altered his relationship nor affected the father's heart.

All that is true, far more deeply, blessedly true, in regard to our relation, the wandering exiles' relation, to God. For, whilst I believe that the highest form of sonship is only realised in the hearts of men who have been made partakers of a new life through Jesus Christ, I believe, just as firmly and earnestly, that every man and woman on the face of the earth, by virtue of physical life derived from God, by virtue of a spiritual being, which, in a very real and deep sense, still bears the image of God, and by reason of His continued love and care over them, is a child of His. The banished son is still a son, and is 'His banished one.' If there is love—wonderful as the thought is, and heart-melting as it ought to be—there must be loss when the child goes away. Human love would not have the same name as God's unless there were some analogy between the two. And though we walk in dark places, and had better acknowledge that the less we speak upon such profound subjects the less likely we are to err, yet it seems to me that the whole preciousness of the revelation of God in Scripture is imperilled unless we frankly recognise this—that His love is like ours, delights in being re-

turned like ours, and is like ours in that it rejoices in presence and knows a sense of loss in absence. If you think that that is too bold a thing to say, remember who it was that taught us that the father fell on the neck of the returning prodigal, and kissed him; and that the rapture of his joy was the token and measure of the reality of his regret, and that it was the father to whom the prodigal son was 'lost.' Deep as is the mystery, let nothing, dear brethren, rob us of the plain fact that God's love moves all around the worst, the unworthiest, the most rebellious in the far-off land, and 'desires not the death of a sinner, but rather that he may turn from his iniquity and live.'

And it is *you, you*, whom He wants back; you whom He would fain rescue from your aversion to good and your carelessness of Him. It is you whom He seeks, according to the great saying of the Master, 'the Father seeketh' for worshippers in spirit and in truth.

III. Note the formidable obstacles to the restoration of the banished.

The words 'banished' and 'expelled' in our text are in the original the same; and the force of the whole would be better expressed if the same English word was employed as the equivalent of both. We should then see more clearly than the variation of rendering in our text enables us to see, that the being 'expelled' is no further stage which God devises means to prevent, but that what is meant is that He provides methods by which the banished should not be banished—that is, should be restored to Himself.

Now, note that the language of this 'wise woman,' unconsciously to herself, confesses that the parallel

that she was trying to draw did not go on all fours; for what she was asking the king to do was simply, by an arbitrary act, to sweep aside law and to remit penalty. She instinctively feels that that is not what can be done by God, and so she says that He 'devises means' by which He can restore His banished.

That is to say, forgiveness and the obliteration of the consequences of a man's sin, and his restoration to the blessed nearness to God, which is life, are by no means such easy and simple matters as people sometimes suppose them to be. The whole drift of popular thinking to-day goes in the direction of a very superficial and easy gospel, which merely says, 'Oh, of course, of course God forgives! Is not God Love? Is not God our Father? What more do you want than that?' Ah! you want a great deal more than that, my friends. Let me press upon you two or three plain considerations. There are formidable obstacles in the way of divine forgiveness.

If there are to be any pardon and restoration at all, they must be such as will leave untouched the sovereign majesty of God's law, and, untampered with, the eternal gulf between good and evil. That easy-going gospel which says, 'God will pardon, of course!' sounds very charitable and very catholic, but at bottom it is very cruel. For it shakes the very foundations on which the government of God must repose. God's law is the manifestation of God's character; and that is no flexible thing which can be bent about at the bidding of a weak good-nature. I believe that men are right in holding that certainly God must pardon, but I believe that they are fatally wrong in not recognising this—that the only kind of forgiveness which is possible for Him to bestow is one in which there

shall be no tampering with the tremendous sanctions of His awful law; and no tendency to teach that it matters little whether a man is good or bad. The pardon, which many of us seem to think is quite sufficient, is a pardon that is nothing more noble than good-natured winking at transgression. And oh! if this be all that men have to lean on, they are leaning on a broken reed. The motto on the blue cover of the *Edinburgh Review*, for over a hundred years now, is true: 'The judge is condemned when the guilty is acquitted.' David struck a fatal blow at the prestige of his own rule, when he weakly let his son off from penalty. And, if it were possible to imagine such a thing, God Himself would strike as fatal a blow at the justice and judgment which are the foundations of His throne, if His forgiveness was such as to be capable of being confounded with love which was too weakly indulgent to be righteous.

Further, if there are to be forgiveness and restoration at all, they must be such as will turn away the heart of the pardoned man from his evil. The very story before us shows that it is not every kind of pardon which makes a man better. The scapegrace Absalom came back unsoftened, without one touch of gratitude to his father in his base heart, without the least gleam of a better nature dawning upon him, and went flaunting about the court until his viciousness culminated in his unnatural rebellion. That is to say, there is a forgiveness which nourishes the seeds of the crimes that it pardons. We have only to look into our own hearts, and we have only to look at the sort of people round us, to be very sure that, unless the forgiveness that is granted us from the heavens has in it an element which will avert our wills and desires

from evil, the pardon will be very soon needed again, for the evil will very soon be done again.

If there are to be forgiveness and restoration at all, they must come in such a fashion as that there shall be no doubt whatsoever of their reality and power. The vague kind of trust in a doubtful mercy, about which I have been speaking, may do all very well for people that have never probed the depths of their own hearts. Superficial notions of our sin, which so many of us have, are contented with superficial remedies for it. But let a man get a glimpse of his own real self, and I think that he will wish for something a great deal more solid to grip hold of, than nebulous talk of the kind that I have been describing. If once we feel ourselves to be struggling in the black flood of that awful river, we shall want a firmer hold upon the bank than is given to us by some rootless tree or other. We must clutch something that will stand a pull, if we are to be drawn from the muddy waters.

People say to us, 'Oh, God will forgive, of course!' Does this world look like a place where forgiveness is such an easy thing? Is there anything more certain than that consequences are inevitable when deeds have been done, and 'that whatsoever a man sows that shall he also reap,' and whatsoever he brews that shall he also drink? And is it into a grim, stern world of retribution like this that people will come, with their smiling, sunny gospel of a matter-of-course forgiveness, upon very easy terms of a slight penitence?

Brethren, God has to 'devise means,' which is a strong way of saying, in analogy to the limitations of humanity, that He cannot, by an arbitrary act of His will, pardon a sinful man. His eternal nature forbids it. His established law forbids it. The fabric of His

universe forbids it. The good of men forbids it. The problem is insoluble by human thought. The love of God is like some great river that pours its waters down its channel, and is stayed by a black dam across its course, along which it feels for any cranny through which it may pour itself. We could never save ourselves, but

‘He that might the vengeance best have took,
Found out the remedy.’

IV. And so the last word that I have to say is to note the triumphant, divine solution of these difficulties.

The work of Jesus Christ, and the work of Jesus Christ alone, meets all the requirements. It vindicates the majesty of law, it deepens the gulf between righteousness and sin. Where is there such a demonstration of the awful truth that ‘the wages of sin is death’ as on that Cross on which the Son of God died for us and for all ‘His banished ones’? Where is there such a demonstration of the fixedness of the divine law as in that death to which the Son of God submitted Himself for us all? Where do we learn the hideousness of sin, the endless antagonism between God and it, and the fatal consequences of it, as we learn them in the sacrifice of our Lord and Saviour? Where do we find the misery and desolation of banishment from God so tragically uttered as in that cry which rent the darkness of eclipse, ‘My God! My God! why hast Thou forsaken Me?’

That work of Christ’s is the only way by which it is made absolutely certain that sins forgiven shall be sins abhorred; and that a man once restored shall cleave to his Restorer as to his Life. That work is the only way by which a man can be absolutely certain

that there is forgiveness, in spite of all the accusations of his own conscience; in spite of all the inexorable working out of penalties in the system of the world which seems to contradict the fond belief; in spite of all that a foreboding gaze tells, or ought to tell, of a judgment that is to follow.

Brethren, God has devised a means. None else could have done so. I beseech you, realise these facts that I have been trying to bring before you, and the considerations that I have based upon them, so far as they commend themselves to your hearts and consciences; and do not be content with acquiescing in them, but act upon them. We are all exiles from God, unless we have been 'brought nigh by the blood of Christ.' In Him, and in Him alone, can God restore His banished ones. In Him, and in Him alone, can we find a pardon which cleanses the heart, and ensures the removal of the sin which it forgives. In Him, and in Him alone, can we find, not a peradventure, not a subjective certainty, but an external fact which proclaims that verily there is forgiveness for us all. I pray you, dear friends, do not be content with that half-truth, which is ever the most dangerous lie, of divine pardon apart from Jesus Christ. Lay your sins upon His head, and your hand in the hand of the Elder Brother, who has come to the far-off land to seek us, and He will lead you back to the Father's house and the Father's heart, and you will be 'no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints and of the household of God.'

PARDONED SIN PUNISHED

'And it came to pass after this, that Absalom prepared him chariots and horses, and fifty men to run before him. 2. And Absalom rose up early, and stood beside the way of the gate: and it was so, that when any man that had a controversy came to the king for judgment, then Absalom called unto him, and said, Of what city art thou? And he said, Thy servant is of one of the tribes of Israel. 3. And Absalom said unto him, See, thy matters are good and right; but there is no man deputed of the king to hear thee. 4. Absalom said moreover, Oh that I were made judge in the land, that every man which hath any suit or cause might come unto me, and I would do him justice! 5. And it was so, that when any man came nigh to him to do him obeisance, he put forth his hand, and took him, and kissed him. 6. And on this manner did Absalom to all Israel that came to the king for judgment: so Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel. 7. And it came to pass after forty years, that Absalom said unto the king, I pray thee, let me go and pay my vow, which I have vowed unto the Lord, in Hebron. 8. For thy servant vowed a vow while I abode at Geshur in Syria, saying, If the Lord shall bring me again indeed to Jerusalem, then I will serve the Lord. 9. And the king said unto him, Go in peace. So he arose, and went to Hebron. 10. But Absalom sent spies throughout all the tribes of Israel, saying, As soon as ye hear the sound of the trumpet, then ye shall say, Absalom reigneth in Hebron. 11. And with Absalom went two hundred men out of Jerusalem, that were called; and they went in their simplicity, and they knew not any thing. 12. And Absalom sent for Ahithophel the Gilonite, David's counsellor, from his city, even from Giloh, while he offered sacrifices. And the conspiracy was strong; for the people increased continually with Absalom.'—2 SAMUEL xv. 1-12.

THERE was little brightness in David's life after his great sin. Nathan had told him, even while announcing his forgiveness, that the sword should never depart from his house; and this revolt of Absalom's may be directly traced to his father's disgraceful crime. The solemn lesson that pardoned sin works out its consequences, so that 'whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap,' is taught by it. The portion of the story with which we are concerned has two stages,—the slow hatching of the plot, and its final outburst.

I. Verses 1 to 6 give us the preparation of the mine. It takes four years, during which Absalom plays all the tricks usual to aspirants for the most sweet voices of the multitude. He seems to have been but a poor creature; but it does not take much brain to do a great deal of mischief. He was vain, headstrong, with a dash

of craft and a large amount of ambition. He had no love for his father, and no ballast of high principle, to say nothing of religion. He was a spoiled child grown to be a man, with a child's petulance and unreason, but a man's passions. He loved his unfortunate sister, but it was as much wounded honour as love which led him to the murder of his elder brother Amnon. That crime cleared his way to the throne; and David's half-and-half treatment of him after it, neither sternly punishing nor freely pardoning, set the son against the father, and left a sense of injury. So he became a rebel.

The story tells very vividly how he adopted the familiar tactics of pretenders. How old, and yet how modern, it reads! We who live in a country where everybody is an 'elector' of some sort, and candidates are plentiful, see the same things going on, in a little different dress, before our eyes. Absalom begins operations by dazzling people with ostentatious splendour. In better days Samuel had trudged on foot, driving a heifer before him, to anoint his father; and royalty had retained a noble simplicity in the hands of Saul and David. But 'plain living and high thinking' did not suit Absalom; and he had gauged the popular taste accurately enough in setting up his chariot with its fifty runners. That was a show something like a king, and, no doubt, much more approved than David's simplicity. But it was an evil omen to any one who looked below the surface. When luxury grows, devotion languishes. The senseless ostentation which creeps into the families of good men, and is sustained by their weak compliance with their spoiled children's wishes, does a world of harm. We in Lancashire have a proverb, 'Clogs, carriage, clogs,' which puts into three words the history of three generations, and is verified over and over again.

How well Absalom has learned the arts of the office-seeker! Along with his handsome equipage he shows admirable devotion to the interests of his 'constituents.' He is early at the gate, so great is his appetite for work; he is accessible to everybody; he flatters each with the assurance that his case is clear; he gently drops hints of sad negligence in high quarters, which he could so soon set right, if only he were in power; and he will not have the respectful salutation of inferiors, but grasps every hard hand, and kisses each tanned cheek, with an affectation of equality very soothing to the dupes. 'Electioneering' is much the same all the world over; and Absalom has a good many imitators nearer home.

There was, no doubt, truth in the charge he made against David of negligence in his judicial and other duties. Ever since his great sin, the king seems to have been stunned into inaction. The heavy sense of demerit had taken the buoyancy out of him, and, though forgiven, he could never regain the elastic energy of purer days. The psalms which possibly belong to this period show a singular passivity. If we suppose that he was much in the seclusion of his palace, a heavily-burdened and spirit-broken man, we can understand how his condition tempted his heartless, dashing son to grasp at the reins which seemed to be dropping from his slack hands, and how his passivity gave opportunity for Absalom's carrying on his schemes undisturbed, and a colour of reasonableness to his charges. For four years this went on unchecked, and apparently unsuspected by the king, who must have been much withdrawn from public life not to have taken alarm. Nothing takes the spring out of a man like the humiliating sense of sin. The whole tone of David's conduct throughout

the revolt is, 'I deserve it all. Let them smite, for God hath bidden them.' To this resourceless, unresisting submission to his enemies, sin had brought the daring soldier. It is not old age that has broken his courage and spirit, but the consciousness of his foul guilt, which weighs on him all the more heavily because he knows that it is pardoned.

II. The second part of our subject tells of the explosion of the long-prepared mine. It was necessary to hoist the flag of revolt elsewhere than in Jerusalem, and some skill is shown in choosing Hebron, which had been the capital before the capture of the Jebusite city, and in which there would be natural jealousy of the new metropolis. The pretext of the sacrifice at Hebron, in pursuance of a vow made by Absalom in his exile, was meant to touch David's heart in two ways,—by appealing to his devotional feelings, and by presenting a pathetic picture of his suffering and devout son vowing in the land where his father's wrath had driven him. It is not the first time that religion has been made the stalking-horse for criminal ambition, nor is it the last. Politicians are but too apt to use it as a cloak for their personal ends. Absalom talking about his vow is a spectacle that might have made the most unsuspecting sure that there was something in the wind. Such a use of religious observances shows more than anything else could do, the utter irreligion of the man who can make it. A son rebelling against his father is an ugly sight, but rebellion disguised as religion adds to the ugliness. David suspects nothing; or, if he does, is too broken to resist, and, perhaps glad at any sign of grace in his son, or pleased to gratify any of his wishes, sends him away with a benediction. What a parting,—the last, though neither knew it!

The plot had spread widely in four years, and messengers had been sent through all Israel to summon its adherents to Hebron. If David had been as popular as in his early days, it would have been impossible for such a widely spread conspiracy to have come so near a head without some faithful soul having been found to tell him of it. But obviously there was much smouldering discontent, arising, no doubt, from such causes as the pressure of taxation, the gloom that hung over the king, the partial paralysis of justice, the transference of the capital, the weight of wars, and, at lowest, the craving for something new. Few reigns or lives set in unclouded brightness. The western horizon is often filled with a bank of blackness. Strangely enough, Absalom invited two hundred men to accompany him, who were ignorant of the plot. That looks as if its strength was outside Jerusalem, as was natural. These innocents were sufficiently associated with Absalom to be asked to accompany him, and, no doubt, he expected to secure their complicity when he got them away. Unsuspecting people are the best tools of knaves. It is better not to be on friendly terms with Absalom, if we would be true to David. The last piece of preparation recorded is the summoning of Ahithophel to come and be the brain of the plot. He had been David's wisest counsellor, and is probably the 'familiar friend, in whom I trusted,' whose defection the Psalmist mourns so bitterly, and whose treachery was a marvellous foreshadowing of the traitor who dipped in the dish with David's Lord. Note that he had already withdrawn from Jerusalem to his own city, from which he came at once to Hebron. Absalom could flatter and play the well-worn tricks of a pretender, but a subtler, cooler head was wanted now, and the treacherous son was

backed up by the traitor friend. 'And the conspiracy was strong; for the people increased continually with Absalom.' What a tragical issue to the joyous loyalty of early days! What a strange madness must have laid hold on the nation to have led them to prefer such a piece of petulance and vanity to their hero-poet-king! What did it mean?

The answer is not far to seek, and it is the great lesson of this story. David's sin was truly repented and freely forgiven, but not left unpunished. God is too loving to shield men from the natural consequences, in the physical and social world, of their sins. The penitent drunkard's hand shakes, and his constitution is not renewed, though his spirit is. Only, punishment is changed into discipline, when the heart rests in the assurance of pardon, and is accepted as a token of a Father's love. In every way God made of the vice the whip to scourge the sinner, and David, like us all, had to drink as he had brewed, though he was forgiven the sin.

A LOYAL VOW

'And the king's servants said unto the king, Behold, thy servants are ready to do whatsoever my lord the king shall appoint.'—2 SAMUEL XV. 15.

WE stand here at the darkest hour of King David's life. Bowed down by the consciousness of his past sin, and recognising in the rebellion of his favourite son the divine chastisement, his early courage and buoyant daring seem to have ebbed from him wholly. He is forsaken by the mass of his subjects, he is preparing to abandon Jerusalem, and to flee as an exile, as he says

himself so pathetically, 'whither I may.' And at that moment of deepest depression there comes one little gleam of consolation and one piece of chivalrous devotion which brightens the whole story. His special retainers, apparently a bodyguard mostly of foreigners, rally round him. Mostly foreigners, I say, for these hard words 'Cherethites and Pelethites' most probably mean inhabitants of the island of Crete, and Philistines. And as to six hundred of them, at all events, there can be no doubt, for they are expressly said to be 'men of Gath who followed after him.' At all events, there was a little nucleus of men, not his own subjects, who determined to share his fate, whatever it was. And the words of my text are their words, 'Behold, thy servants are ready to do whatsoever the king shall appoint.' Or, as the word stands in the original, in an abrupt, half-finished sentence, even more pathetic, 'According to all that my lord the king shall appoint, behold thy servants.' These men were foreigners, not bound to render obedience to the king, but giving it because their hearts were touched. They were loyal amongst rebels, so many Abdiels, 'among the faithless, faithful only' these, and they avowed their determination to cleave to the sovereign of their choice at a time when his back was at the wall, and their determination to follow him meant only peril and privation. They were filled with a passionate personal attachment to the king, and that personal attachment was ready to manifest itself as a willing sacrifice, as such love always is ready.

Now surely in all this there is a lesson for us. The heroism of men towards a man, the uncalculating devotion and magnificent self-sacrifice of which the poorest human soul is capable when touched to fine issues

by some heart-love, are surely not all meant to be lavished on fellow-creatures, who, alas! generally receive the most of them. But these rude Philistines and Gittites, Goliath's fellow-townsmen, may preach to us Christians a lesson. Why should not we say as they said, 'According to all that my Lord the King shall appoint, behold Thy servants'?

I. So then, first, our King's will ought to be our will.

The obedience that is promised in these words is not the obedience of action only, but it is the bowing down of the heart. And for us Christian men there is neither peace nor nobleness in our lives, except in the measure in which the will of Jesus Christ and our wills are accurately conterminous and identical. Wheresoever the two coincide, there is strength for us; wheresoever they diverge, there are weakness and certain ruin. These two wills ought to be like two of Euclid's triangles, or other geometric figures, the one laid upon the other, and each line and curve and angle accurately corresponding and coinciding, so that the two cover precisely the same ground.

Christ's will my will; that is religion. And you and I are Christians just in the measure in which that coincidence of wills is true about us, and not one hair's-breadth further, for all our professions. Wheresoever my will diverges from Christ, in that particular I am not His man; and 'Christian' simply means 'Christ's man.' I belong to Him when I think as He does, love as He does, will as He does, accept His commandment as the law of my life, His pattern as my example, His providence as sufficient and as good. Where we thus yield ourselves to Him, there we are strong, and so far, and only so far, have we a right to say that we are the King's servants at all.

This absolute submission we do render to one another when our hearts are touched; and the fact that men can and do give it—husbands to wives, wives to husbands, children to parents, friends to one another—the fact that there is the capacity for that giving of one's self away, lodged deep in our nature, tells us what we are meant to do with it. 'Whose image and superscription hath it?' Was it meant that we should thus live in slavish submission even to the dearest loved ones? Surely not; for that is the destruction of individuality. No, but it was meant that we should lay our wills down at Christ's feet and say, 'Not my will, but Thine,' and Thine mine because I have made it mine by love. Then there is rest, and then we have solved the secret of the world, and are what our Lord would have us to be. Oh! do not our relations to our dear ones, with all that infinite power of self-sacrifice that our love brings with it, rebuke the partial extent of our surrender to our Master? and may we not be ashamed when we contrast the joy that we feel in giving up to those that we love, and the reluctance with which, too often, we obey the Master's commandments, and the long years of repining and murmuring before we 'submit,' as we call it, which too often means accept His providences as inevitable, though not as welcome? To be 'ready to do whatsoever my Lord the King shall choose,' believing that His choice is wisdom and kindness for us, and His commandments a blessing and a gift, is the attitude and temper for us all. Is there any other attitude to Jesus Christ which corresponds to our relation to Him, to what He has done for us, to what we say that He is to us? He has the right to us, because He has given us Himself. He asks nothing from us but that of which He has already

set us the example. 'He gave Himself for us,' as the Apostle says with emphasis that is often unnoticed. 'He gave Himself for us' that He might '*purchase us for Himself.*' He who would possess another must impart Himself, and love, that yields a whole man to the loved one, only springs when the loved one mutually yields her whole heart. The King does not command from above, but He comes down amongst us, and He says, 'I gave Myself for thee; what givest thou to Me?' O brethren, let us answer with that brave, chivalrous old Gittite:—'As the Lord liveth, and as my Lord the King liveth, surely in what place my Lord the King shall be, whether in death or life, even there also will Thy servant be.'

II. Then notice again, still sticking to our story, that this yielding up of will, if it is worth anything, will become the more intense and fervent when surrounded by rebels.

All Israel, with that poor feather-headed, vain Absalom, were on the one side, and David and these foreigners were on the other. Years of quiet uneventful life would never have brought out such magnificent heroism of devotion and self-surrender, as was crowded into that one moment of loyalty asserted in the face of triumphant rebels and traitors.

In like manner, the more Christ's reign is set at nought by the people about us, and the less they recognise the blessedness and the duty of submission to Him, the more strong and unmistakable should be the utterance of our loyalty. We should grasp His hand tighter by reason of the storms that may rage round about us. And if we dwell amongst those who, in any measure, deny or neglect His merciful dominion, let us see to it that we all the more hoist our colours at our doors, and

stand by them when they are hoisted, that nobody may mistake under which King we serve.

You in your places of business, you young men in your warehouses, and all of us in our several spheres, have to come across many people who have no share in our loyalty and offer no allegiance to our King. That is the reason for intenser loyalty on our part. Never you mind what others say or do; do not take your orders from them. Better be with the handful that rally round David than with the crowds that run after Absalom! Better be amongst the few that are faithful than amongst the multitudes that depart! Dare to be singular, if it comes to that; and at all events remember that your relationship to your Master is a thing that concerns Him and you chiefly, and that you are not to take the pattern of your loyalty, nor the orders for your lives, from any lips but His own.

Hush all other voices that would command, and hush them that you may listen to Him. It is always difficult enough for Christian men to ascertain, in perplexed circumstances, the clear path of duty; but it is impossible if, along with His voice, we let the buzz of the crowd be audible in our ears. There is only one way by which we can hear what our 'Lord the King appoints,' and that is by making a great stillness in our souls, and neither letting our own yelping inclinations give tongue, nor the babble of men round us, and their notions of life and of what is right, have influence upon us, but waiting to hear what God the Lord, speaking in Christ the King, has to say to us. And, remember, the more rebels there are, the more need for us to be conspicuously loyal to our King.

III. Again, this complete yielding of ourselves in practical obedience and heart submission to command-

ments and providences is to be maintained, whatsoever it may lead to in the way of privation and difficulty.

It was no holiday vow, made upon some parade day, that these brave foreigners were bringing to their king now, but it meant 'we are ready to suffer, starve, fight, lose everything, die if need be, to be true to thee.' And the very thought of the impending danger elevated the men's consciousness, and made heroes out of very common people. And perhaps that is the best effect of our difficulties and sorrows, that they strike fire sometimes (if they are rightly accepted and used) out of what seems to be only dead, lumpish matter, and many a Christian shoots up into a stature of greatness and nobleness in his sorrow, who was but a very commonplace creature when all things went well with him. That is the kind of obedience that Christ delights to accept, obedience that is ready for anything, and does not wait to make sure that there is no danger of forfeiting a whole skin and a quiet life, before it vows itself to service. Are we only to be 'fair-weather Christians,' or are we to be prepared for all the trials and sufferings that may befall us? A Christianity that does not bring any worldly penalties along with it is not worth much. Christians of Christ's pattern have generally to give up something for their Christianity. They give up nothing that it is not gain to lose, nothing that they are not better without, but they have to surrender much in which other people find great enjoyment, and which their weaker selves would delight in too. Are you ready, my brother, for that? 'Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin.' The old days of heroism and martyrdom are done with, as far as we are concerned, whatever may lie in the future. But do we make willingly and gladly the

surrenders and the self-abnegations that are demanded by our loyalty to our Master? Have we ever learned to say about any line of action that our poor, lower nature grasps at, and our higher, enlightened by communion with Jesus Christ, forbids: 'So did not I because of the fear of the Lord'? We can talk about following Christ's footsteps; do you think that if we had stood where these rude soldiers stood, or had anything as dark in prospect, as the price of our faithfulness to our King, as they had as the price of faithfulness to theirs, there would have rung from our lips the utterly sincere vow that sprang joyously from theirs: 'Behold Thy servants, ready to do whatever our Lord the King shall appoint'?

IV. A final thought, which travels beyond my text, is that such thorough-going obedience, irrespective of consequences, is the secret of all blessedness.

'Great peace have they which love Thy law': the peace of conscience; the peace of ceasing from that which is our worst enemy, self-will; the peace of self-surrender; the peace of feeling 'Tis His to command; 'tis mine to obey'; the peace of casting the whole settling of the campaign on the King's shoulders, and of finding our duty restricted to tramping along with cheery heart on the path that He has appointed. That is worth having. Oh! if we could cease from self and lay our wills down before Him, then we should be quiet. The tranquil heart is the heart which has the law of Christ within it, and the true delight of life belongs to those who truly say, 'I delight to do Thy will.' So yielding, so obeying, so submitting, so surrendering one's self, life becomes quiet, and strong, and sweet. And, if I might so turn the story that we have been considering, the faithful soldiers who have been

true to the King when His throne was contested, will march with laurelled heads in His triumphant train when He comes back after His final and complete victory, and reign with Him in the true City of Peace, where His will shall be perfectly done by loving hearts, and all His servants shall be kings.

ITTAI OF GATH

'And Ittai answered the king, and said, As the Lord liveth, and as my lord the king liveth, surely in what place my lord the king shall be, whether in death or life, even there also will thy servant be.'—2 SAMUEL xv. 21.

It was the darkest hour in David's life. No more pathetic page is found in the Old Testament than that which tells the story of his flight before Absalom. He is crushed by the consciousness that his punishment is deserved—the bitter fruit of the sin that filled all his later life with darkness. His courage and his buoyancy have left him. He has no spirit to make a stand or strike a blow. If Shimei runs along the hillside abreast of him, shrieking curses as he goes, all he says is: 'Let him curse; for the Lord hath bidden him.'

So, heartbroken and spiritless, he leaves Jerusalem. And as soon as he has got clear of the city he calls a halt, in order that he may muster his followers and see on whom he may depend. Foremost among the little band come six hundred men from Gath—Philistines—from Goliath's city. These men, singularly enough, the king had chosen as his bodyguard; perhaps he was not altogether sure of the loyalty of his own subjects, and possibly felt safer with foreign mercenaries, who could have no secret leanings to the deposed house of Saul. Be that as it may, the narrative tells us that these men had 'come after him from Gath.' He had been there

twice in the old days, in his flight from Saul, and the second visit had extended over something more than a year. Probably during that period his personal attraction, and his reputation as a brilliant leader, had led these rough soldiers to attach themselves to his service, and to be ready to forsake home and kindred in order to fight beside him.

At all events here they are, 'faithful among the faithless,' as foreign soldiers surrounding a king often are—notably, for instance, the Swiss guard in the French Revolution. Their strong arms might have been of great use to David, but his generosity cannot think of involving them in his fall, and so he says to them: 'I am not going to fight; I have no plan. I am going where I can. You go back and "worship the rising sun." Absalom will take you and be glad of your help. And as for me, I thank you for your past loyalty. Mercy and peace be with you!'

It is a beautiful nature that in the depth of sorrow shrinks from dragging other people down with itself. Generosity breeds generosity, and this Philistine captain breaks out into a burst of passionate devotion, garnished, in soldier fashion, with an unnecessary oath or two, but ringing very sincere and meaning a great deal. As for himself and his men, they have chosen their side. Whoever goes, they stay. Whatever befalls, they stick by David; and if the worst come to the worst they can all die together, and their corpses lie in firm ranks round about their dead king. David's heart is touched and warmed by their outspoken loyalty; he yields and accepts their service. Ittai and his noble six hundred tramp on, out of our sight, and all their households behind them. Now what is there in all that, to make a sermon out of?

I. First, look at the picture of that Philistine soldier, as teaching us what grand passionate self-sacrifice may be evolved out of the roughest natures.

Analyse his words, and do you not hear, ringing in them, three things, which are the seed of all nobility and splendour in human character? First, a passionate personal attachment; then, that love issuing, as such love always does, in willing sacrifice that reckes not for a moment of personal consequences; that is ready to accept anything for itself if it can serve the object of its devotion, and will count life well expended if it is flung away in such a service. And we see, lastly, in these words a supreme restful delight in the presence of him whom the heart loves. For Ittai and his men, the one thing needful was to be beside him in whose eye they had lived, from whose presence they had caught inspiration; their trusted leader, before whom their souls bowed down. So then this vehement speech is the pure language of love.

Now these three things,—a passionate personal attachment, issuing in spontaneous heroism of self-abandonment, and in supreme satisfaction in the beloved presence,—may spring up in the rudest, roughest nature. A Philistine soldier was not a very likely man in whom to find refined and lofty emotion. He was hard by nature, hardened by his rough trade; and unconscious that he was doing anything at all heroic or great. Something had smitten this rock, and out of it there came the pure refreshing stream. And so I say to you, the weakest and the lowest, the roughest and the hardest, the most selfishly absorbed man and woman among us, has lying in him and her dormant capacities for flaming up into such a splendour of devotion and magnificence of heroic self-sacrifice as is

represented in these words of my text. A mother will do it for her child, and never think that she has done anything extraordinary; husbands will do such things for wives; wives for husbands; friends and lovers for one another. All who know the sweetness and power of the bond of affection know that there is nothing more gladsome than to fling oneself away for the sake of those whom we love. And the capacity for such love and sacrifice lies in all of us. Prosaic, commonplace people as we are, with no great field on which to work out our heroisms; yet we have it in us to love and give ourselves away thus, if once the heart be stirred.

And lastly, this capacity which lies dormant in all of us, if once it is roused to action, will make a man blessed and dignified as nothing else will. The joy of unselfish love is the purest joy that man can taste; the joy of perfect self-sacrifice is the highest joy that humanity can possess, and they lie open for us all.

And wherever, in some humble measure, these emotions of which I have been speaking are realised, there you see weakness springing up into strength, and the ignoble into loftiness. Astronomers tell us that sometimes a star that has shone inconspicuous, and stood low down in their catalogues as of fifth or sixth magnitude, will all at once flame out, having kindled and caught fire somehow, and will blaze in the heavens, outshining Jupiter and Venus. And so some poor, vulgar, narrow nature, touched by this Promethean fire of pure love that leads to perfect sacrifice, will 'flame in the forehead of the morning sky,' an undying splendour, and a light for evermore.

Brethren, my appeal to you is a very plain and simple one, founded on these facts:—You all have that capacity in you, and you all are responsible for the use

of it. What have you done with it? Is there any person or thing in this world that has ever been able to lift you up out of your miserable selves? Is there any magnet that has proved strong enough to raise you from the low levels along which your life creeps? Have you ever known the thrill of resolving to become the bondservant and the slave of some great cause not your own? Or are you, as so many of you are, like spiders living in the midst of your web, mainly intent upon what you can catch by it? You have these capacities slumbering in you. Have you ever set a light to that inert mass of enthusiasm that lies within you? Have you ever woke up the sleeper? Look at this rough soldier of my text, and learn from him the lesson that there is nothing that so ennobles and dignifies a commonplace nature as enthusiasm for a great cause, or self-sacrificing love for a worthy heart.

II. The second remark which I make is this:—These possibilities of love and sacrifice point plainly to God in Christ as their true object.

‘Whose image and superscription hath it?’ said Christ, looking at the Roman *denarius* that they brought and laid on His palm. If the Emperor’s head is on it, why, then, *he* has a right to it as tribute. And then He went on to say, ‘Render, therefore, unto Cæsar the things which are Cæsar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s.’ So there are things that have God’s image and superscription stamped on them, and such are our hearts, our whole constitution and nature. As plainly as the penny had the head of Tiberius on it, and therefore proclaimed that he was Emperor where it was current, so plainly does every soul carry in the image of God the witness that He is its owner and that it should be rendered in tribute to Him.

And amongst all these marks of a divine possession and a divine destination printed upon human nature, it seems to me that none is plainer than this fact, that we can all of us thus give ourselves away in the abandonment of a profound and all-surrendering love. That capacity unmistakably proclaims that it is destined to be directed towards God and to find its rest in Him. As distinctly as some silver cup, with its owner's initials and arms engraved upon it, declares itself to be 'meet for the master's use,' so distinctly does your soul, by reason of this capacity, proclaim that it is meant to be turned to Him in whom alone all love can find its perfect satisfaction; for whom alone it is supremely blessed and great to lose life itself; and who only has authority over human spirits.

We are made with hearts that need to rest upon an absolute love; we are made with understandings that need to grasp a pure, a perfect, and, as I believe, paradoxical though it may sound, a personal Truth. We are made with wills that crave for an absolute authoritative command, and we are made with a moral nature that needs a perfect holiness. And we need all that love, truth, authority, purity, to be gathered into one, for our misery is that, when we set out to look for treasures, we have to go into many lands and to many merchants, to buy many goodly pearls. But we need One of great price, in which all our wealth may be invested. We need that One to be an undying and perpetual possession. There is One to whom our love can ever cleave, and fear none of the sorrows or imperfections that make earthward-turned love a rose with many a thorn, One for whom it is pure gain to lose ourselves, One who is plainly the only

worthy recipient of the whole love and self-surrender of the heart.

That One is God, revealed and brought near to us in Jesus Christ. In that great Saviour we have a love at once divine and human, we have the great transcendent instance of love leading to sacrifice. On that love and sacrifice for us Christ builds His claim on us for our hearts, and our all. Life alone can communicate life; it is only light that can diffuse light. It is only love that can kindle love; it is only sacrifice that can inspire sacrifice. And so He comes to us, and asks that we should just love Him back again as He has loved us. He first gives Himself utterly for and to us, and then asks us to give ourselves wholly to Him. He first yields up His own life, and then He says: 'He that loseth his life for My sake shall find it.' The object, the true object, for all this depth of love which lies slumbering in our hearts, is God in Christ, the Christ that died for us.

III. And now, lastly, observe that the terrible misdirection of these capacities is the sin and the misery of the world.

I will not say that such emotions, even when expended on creatures, are ever wasted. For however unworthy may be the objects on which they are lavished, the man himself is the better and the higher for having cherished them. The mother, when she forgets self in her child, though her love and self-forgetfulness and self-sacrifice may, in some respects, be called but an animal instinct, is elevated and ennobled by the exercise of them. The patriot and the thinker, the philanthropist, ay! even—although I take him to be the lowest in the scale—the soldier who, in some cause which he thinks to be a good one, and

not merely in the tigerish madness of the battlefield, throws away his life—are lifted in the scale of being by their self-abnegation.

And so I am not going to say that when men love each other passionately and deeply, and sacrifice themselves for one another, or for some cause or purpose affecting only temporal matters, the precious elixir of love is wasted. God forbid! But I do say that all these objects, sweet and gracious as some of them are, ennobling and elevating as some of them are, if they are taken apart from God, are insufficient to fill your hearts: and that if they are slipped in between you and God, as they often are, then they bring sin and sorrow.

There is nothing more tragic in this world than the misdirection of man's capacity for love and sacrifice. It is like the old story in the Book of Daniel, which tells how the heathen monarch made a great feast, and when the wine began to inflame the guests, sent for the sacred vessels taken from the Temple of Jerusalem, that had been used for Jehovah's worship; and (as the narrative says, with a kind of shudder at the profanation), 'They brought the golden vessels that were taken out of the temple of the House of God, which was at Jerusalem, and the king and his princes, his wives and his concubines, drank in them. They drank wine and praised the gods.' So this heart of mine, which, as I said, has the Master's initials and His arms engraven upon it, in token that it is His cup, I too often fill with the poisonous and intoxicating draught of earthly pleasure and earthly affections; and as I drink it, the madness goes through my veins, and I praise gods of my own making instead of Him whom alone I ought to love.

Ah, brethren ! we should be our own rebukers in this matter, and the heroism of the world should put to shame the cowardice and the selfishness of the Church. Contrast the depth of your affection for your household with the tepidity of your love for your Saviour. Contrast the willingness with which you sacrifice yourself for some dear one with the grudgingness with which you yield yourselves to Him. Contrast the rest and the sense of satisfaction in the presence of those whom you love, and your desolation when they are absent, with the indifference whether you have Christ beside you or not. And remember that the measure of your power of loving is the measure of your obligation to love your Lord ; and that if you are all frost to Him and all fervour to them, then in a very solemn sense 'a man's foes shall be they of his own household.' 'He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me.'

And so let me gather all that I have been saying into the one earnest beseeching of you that you would bring that power of uncalculating love and self-sacrificing affection which is in you, and would fasten it where it ought to fix—on Christ who died on the cross for you. Such a love will bring blessedness to you. Such a love will ennoble and dignify your whole nature, and make you a far greater and fairer man or woman than you ever otherwise could be. Like some little bit of black carbon put into an electric current, my poor nature will flame into beauty and radiance when that spark touches it. So love Him and be at peace ; give yourselves to Him and He will give you back yourselves, ennobled and transfigured by the surrender. Lay yourselves on His altar, and that altar will sanctify both the giver and the gift. If you can take this rough

Philistine soldier's words in their spirit, and in a higher sense say, 'Whether I live I live unto the Lord, or whether I die I die unto the Lord; living or dying, I am the Lord's,' He will let you enlist in His army; and give you for your marching orders this command and this hope, 'If any man serve Me let him follow Me; and where I am there shall also My servant be.'

THE WAIL OF A BROKEN HEART

'Now Absalom in his lifetime had taken and reared up for himself a pillar, which is in the king's dale: for he said, I have no son to keep my name in remembrance; and he called the pillar after his own name: and it is called unto this day, Absalom's Place. 19. Then said Ahimaaz the son of Zadok, Let me now run, and bear the king tidings, how that the Lord hath avenged him of his enemies. 20. And Joab said unto him, Thou shalt not bear tidings this day, but thou shalt bear tidings another day; but this day thou shalt bear no tidings, because the king's son is dead. 21. Then said Joab to Cush, Go tell the king what thou hast seen. And Cush bowed himself unto Joab, and ran. 22. Then said Ahimaaz the son of Zadok yet again to Joab, But howsoever, let me, I pray thee, also run after Cush. And Joab said, Wherefore wilt thou run, my son, seeing that thou hast no tidings ready? 23. But howsoever, said he, let me run. And he said unto him, Run. Then Ahimaaz ran by the way of the plain, and overran Cush. 24. And David sat between the two gates: and the watchman went up to the roof over the gate unto the wall, and lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold a man running alone. 25. And the watchman cried, and told the king. And the king said, If he be alone, there is tidings in his mouth. And he came apace, and drew near. 26. And the watchman saw another man running: and the watchman called unto the porter, and said, Behold another man running alone. And the king said, He also bringeth tidings. 27. And the watchman said, Me thinketh the running of the foremost is like the running of Ahimaaz the son of Zadok. And the king said, He is a good man, and cometh with good tidings. 28. And Ahimaaz called, and said unto the king, All is well. And he fell down to the earth upon his face before the king, and said, Blessed be the Lord thy God, which hath delivered up the men that lifted up their hand against my lord the king. 29. And the king said, Is the young man Absalom safe? And Ahimaaz answered, When Joab sent the king's servant, and me thy servant, I saw a great tumult, but I knew not what it was. 30. And the king said unto him, Turn aside, and stand here. And he turned aside, and stood still. 31. And, behold, Cush came; and Cush said, Tidings, my lord the king: for the Lord hath avenged thee this day of all them that rose up against thee. 32. And the king said unto Cush, Is the young man Absalom safe? And Cush answered, The enemies of my lord the king, and all that rise against thee to do thee hurt, be as that young man is. 33. And the king was much moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, thus he said, O my son Absalom! my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!'—2 SAMUEL XVIII. 18-33.

THE first verse of this passage and the one preceding it give a striking contrast between the actual and the

designed burial-place of Absalom. The great pit among the sombre trees, where his bloody corpse was hastily flung, with three darts through his heart, and the rude cairn piled over it, were a very different grave from the ostentatious tomb 'in the king's dale,' which he had built to keep his memory green. This was what all his restless intrigues and unbridled passions and dazzling hopes had come to. He wanted to be remembered, and he got his wish; but what a remembrance! That gloomy pit preaches anew the vanity of 'vaulting ambition which o'erleaps itself,' and tells us once more that

'Only the actions of the just
Smell sweet, and blossom in the dust.'

I. The first picture here shows a glimpse of the battlefield, and brings before us three men, each in different ways exhibiting how small a thing Absalom's death was to all but the heartbroken father, and each going his own road, heedless of what lay below the heap of stones. The world goes on all the same, though death is busy, and some heart-strings be cracked. The minute details which fill the most part of the story, lead up to, and throw into prominence, David's burst of agony at the close. The three men, Ahimaaz, Joab, and the Cushite (Ethiopian), are types of different kinds of self-engrossment, which is little touched by others' sorrows. The first, Ahimaaz, the young priest who had already done good service to David as a spy, is full of the joyous excitement of victory, and eager to run with what he thinks such good tidings. The word in verse 19, 'bear tidings,' always implies good news; and the youthful warrior-priest cannot conceive that the death of the head of

the revolt can darken to the king the joy of victory. He is truly loyal, but, in his youthful impetuosity and excitement, cannot sympathise with the desolate father, who sits expectant at Mahanaim. Right feeling and real affection often fail in sympathy, for want of putting oneself in another's place; and, with the best intentions, wound where they mean to cheer. A little imagination, guided by affection, would have taught Ahimaaz that the messenger who told David of Absalom's death would thrust a sharper spear into his heart than Joab had driven into Absalom's.

Joab is a very different type of indifference. He is too much accustomed to battle to be much flushed with victory, and has killed too many men to care much about killing another. He is cool enough to measure the full effect of the news on David; and though he clearly discerns the sorrow, has not one grain of participation in it. He has some liking for Ahimaaz, and so does not wish him to run, but dissuades him on the ground (verse 22, Revised Version) that he will win no reward. That is the true spirit of the mercenary, who cannot conceive of a man taking trouble unless he gets paid for it somehow, and will fight and kill, all in the way of business, without the least spark of enthusiasm for a cause. Hard stolidity and brutal carelessness shielded him from any 'womanish' tenderness. Absalom was dead, and he had killed him. It was a good thing, for it had put out the fire of revolt. No doubt David would be sorry, but that mattered little. Only it was better for the message to go by some one whose fate was of no consequence. So he picks out 'the Cushite,' probably an Ethiopian slave; and if David in his anguish should harm him, nobody will be hurt but a friendless stranger.

The Cushite gets his orders; and he too is, in another

fashion, careless of their contents and effect. Without a word, he bows himself to Joab, and runs, as unconcerned as the paper of a letter that may break a heart. Ahimaaz still pleads to go, and, gaining leave, takes the road across the Jordan valley, which was probably easier, though longer; while the other messenger went by the hills, which was a shorter and rougher road.

II. The scene shifts to Mahanaim, where David had found refuge. He can scarcely have failed to take an omen from the name, which commemorated how another anxious heart had camped there, and been comforted, when it saw the vision of the encamping angels above its own feeble, undefended tents, and Jacob 'called the name of that place Mahanaim' (that is, 'Two Camps'). How the change of scene in the narrative helps its vividness, and makes us share in the strain of expectancy and the tension of watching the approaching messengers! The king, restless for news, has come out to the space between the outer and inner gates, and planted a lookout on the gate-house roof. The sharp eyes see a solitary figure making for the city, across the plain. David recognises that, since he is alone, he must be a messenger; and now the question is, What has he to tell? We see him coming nearer, and share the suspense. Then the second man appears; and clearly something more had happened, to require two. What was it? They run fast; but the moments are long till they arrive. The watchman recognises Ahimaaz by his style of running; and David wistfully tries to forecast his tidings from his character. It is a pathetic effort, and reveals how anxiously his heart was beating.

As soon as Ahimaaz is within earshot, though panting with running, no doubt, he shouts, with what breath

is left, the one word, 'Peace!' and then, at David's feet, tells the victory. 'Blessed be the Lord thy God'; the triumph was Jehovah's gift, and in it He had shown Himself David's God, and vindicated His servant's trust. But Ahimaaz is more devout and thankful than David. The king has neither praise and thankfulness to God nor to man. He has no pleasure in the victory; no interest in the details of the fight; no thankfulness for a restored kingdom; no word of eulogium for his soldiers; nothing but devouring anxiety for his unworthy son. How chilling to Ahimaaz, all flushed with eagerness, and proud of victory, and panting with running, and hungry for some word of praise, it must have been, to get for sole answer the question about Absalom! He shrinks from telling the whole truth, which, indeed, the Cushite was officially despatched to tell; but his enigmatic story of a great tumult as he left the field, of which he did not know the meaning, was meant to prepare for the bitter news. So he is bid to stand aside, and no words more vouchsafed to him. A cool reception, unworthy of David! As Ahimaaz stood there, neglected, he would think that the politic Joab was right after all.

The Cushite must have been close behind him, for he comes up as soon as the brief conversation is over. A deeper anxiety must have waited his tidings; for he must have something more to tell than victory. His first words add nothing to Ahimaaz's information. What, then, had he come for? David forebodes evil, and, with the monotony of a man absorbed in one anxiety, repeats verbatim his former question. Poor king! He more than half knew the answer, before it was given. The Cushite with some tenderness veils the fate of Absalom in the wish that all the king's

enemies may be 'as that young man is.' But the veil was thin, and the attempt to console by reminding of the fact that the dead man was an enemy as well as a son, was swept away like a straw before the father's torrent of grief.

III. The sobs of a broken heart cannot be analysed; and this wail of almost inarticulate agony, with its infinitely pathetic reiteration, is too sacred for many words. Grief, even if passionate, is not forbidden by religion; and David's sensitive poet-nature felt all emotions keenly. We are meant to weep; else wherefore is there calamity? But there were elements in David's mourning which were not good. It blinded him to blessings and to duties. His son was dead; but his rebellion was dead with him, and that should have been more present to his mind. His soldiers had fought well, and his first task should have been to honour and to thank them. He had no right to sink the king in the father, and Joab's unfeeling remonstrance, which followed, was wise and true in substance, though rough almost to brutality in tone. Sorrow which sees none of the blue because of one cloud, however heavy and thunderous, is sinful. Sorrow which sits with folded hands, like the sisters of Lazarus, and lets duties drift, that it may indulge in the luxury of unrestrained tears, is sinful. There is no tone of 'It is the Lord! let Him do what seemeth Him good,' in this passionate plaint; and so there is no soothing for the grief. The one consolation lies in submission. Submissive tears wash the heart clean; rebellious ones blister it.

David's grief was the bitter fruit of his own sin. He had weakly indulged Absalom, and had probably spared the rod, in the boy's youth, as he certainly spared the sword when Absalom had murdered his brother. His

own immorality had loosened the bonds of family purity, and made him ashamed to punish his children. He had let Absalom flaunt and swagger and live in luxury, and put no curb on him ; and here was the end of his foolish softness. How many fathers and mothers are the destroyers of their children to-day in the very same fashion ! That grave in the wood might teach parents how their fatal fondness may end. Children, too, may learn from David's grief what an unworthy son can do to stuff his father's pillow with thorns, and to break his heart at last.

But there is another side to this grief. It witnesses to the depth and self-sacrificing energy of a father's love. The dead son's faults are all forgotten and obliterated by death's 'effacing fingers.' The headstrong, thankless rebel is, in David's mind, a child again, and the happy old days of his innocence and love are all that remain in memory. The prodigal is still a son. The father's love is immortal, and cannot be turned away by any faults. The father is willing to die for the disobedient child. Such purity and depth of affection lives in human hearts. So self-forgetting and incapable of being provoked is an earthly father's love. May we not see in this disclosure of David's paternal love, stripping it of its faults and excesses, some dim shadow of the greater love of God for His prodigals,—a love which cannot be dammed back or turned away by any sin, and which has found a way to fulfil David's impossible wish, in that it has given Jesus Christ to die for His rebellious children, and so made them sharers of His own kingdom ?

BARZILLAI

'And Barzillai said unto the king, How long have I to live, that I should go up with the king unto Jerusalem? 35. I am this day fourscore years old: and can I discern between good and evil? can thy servant taste what I eat or what I drink? can I hear any more the voice of singing men and singing women? wherefore then should thy servant be yet a burden unto my lord the king? 36. Thy servant will go a little way over Jordan with the king: and why should the king recompense it me with such a reward? 37. Let thy servant, I pray thee, turn back again, that I may die in mine own city, and be buried by the grave of my father and of my mother. But behold thy servant Chimham; let him go over with my lord the king; and do to him what shall seem good unto thee.'—2 SAMUEL xix. 34-37.

To the Young.

PEOPLE often fancy that religion is only good to die by, and many exhortations are addressed to the young, founded on the possibility that an early death may be their lot. That, no doubt, is a very solemn consideration, but it is by no means the sole ground on which such an appeal may or should be rested. To some of you an early death is destined. To the larger number of you will be granted a life protracted to middle age, and to some of you silver hair will come, and you may see your children's children. I wish to win you seriously to look forward to the life on earth that is before you, and to the end to which it is likely to come, if you be spared in the world long enough.

The little picture in these verses is a very beautiful one. David had been fleeing from his rebellious Absalom, and his adversity had winnowed his friends. He had crossed the Jordan to the hill-country beyond, and there, while he was lurking with his crown in peril, and a price on his head, and old friends dropping from him in their eagerness to worship the rising sun, this Barzillai with others brought him seasonable help (xvii. 23). When David returned victorious, Barzillai met him again. David offered to take him to

Jerusalem and to set him in honour there. The old man answered in the words of our text.

Now I take them for the sake of the picture of old age which they give us. Look at them: the intellectual powers are dimmed, all taste for the pleasures and delights of sense is gone, ambition is dead, capacity for change is departed. What is left? This old man lives in the past and in the future; the early child-love of the father and mother who, eighty years ago, rejoiced over his cradle, remains fresh; he cannot 'any more hear the voice of the singing men and women,' but he can hear the tones, clear over all these years, of the dear ones whom he first learned to love. The furthest past is fresh and vivid, and his heart and memory are true to it. Also he looks forward familiarly and calmly to the very near end, and lives with the thought of death. He keeps house with it now. It is nearer to him than the world of living men. In memory is half of his being, and in hope is the other half. All his hopes are now simplified and reduced to *one*, a hope to die and be united again with the dear ones whom he had so long remembered. And so he goes back to his city, and passes out of the record—an example of a green and good old age.

Now, young people, is not that picture one to touch your hearts? You think in your youthful flush of power and interest, that life will go on for ever as it has begun, and it is all but impossible to get you to look forward to what life must come to. I want you to learn from that picture of a calm, bright old age, a lesson or two of what life will certainly do to you, that I may found on these certainties the old, old appeal, 'Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth.'

I. Life will gradually rob you of your interest in all earthly things.

Your time of life is full of ebullient feeling, and sees freshness, glory, and beauty everywhere. Even the least enthusiastic men are enthusiastic in their early days. You have physical strength, the keenness of unpalled senses, the delights of new powers, the blessedness of mere living. All this springs partly from physical causes, partly from the novelty of your position. Thank God! all young creatures are happy, and you among the rest.

Now, I do not ask you to restrain and mortify these things. But I do ask you to remember the end. It is as certain that joys will pall, it is as certain that subjects of interest will be exhausted, it is as certain that powers will decay, as that they now are what they are. All these grave, middle-aged, careful people round you were like you once. You, if you live, will be like them. The spring tints are natural, but they are transient; the blossoms are not always on the fruit-trees.

Think, then, of the End: to make you thankful; to stimulate you; but also to lead you to take for your object what will never pall. All created things go. Only the gospel provides you with a theme which never becomes stale, with objects which are inexhaustible.

Here is a lesson for—

(a) Thinkers: 'Knowledge, it shall vanish away.'

(b) Sensualists: 'Man delights me not, nor woman either.' How old was he who said that?

(c) Ambitious, self-advancing men.

Is it worth your while to devote yourself to transient aims?

Is it congruous with your dignity as immortal souls?

Is it innocent or guilty?

Is the gospel not a thing to live by as well as to die by?

II. Life will certainly rob you of the power to change.

Barzillai knew that David's court was no place for him; he had been bred on the mountains of Gilead, and his habits suited only a simple country life. The court might be better, but he could not fit into it. But there was his boy Chimham; take him, he was young enough to bend and mould.

Now this is true in a far loftier way. I need not dwell on the universality of this law, how it applies to all manner of men, but I use it now in reference only to the gospel and your relation to it. You will never again be so likely to become a Christian, if you let these early days pass.

You say, 'I will have my fling, sow my wild oats, will wait a little longer, and then'—and then what? You will find that it is infinitely harder to close with Christ than it would have been before.

While you delay, you are stiffening into the habit of rejection. Custom is one of our mightiest friends or foes.

While you delay, you are doing violence to conscience, and so weakening that to which the gospel appeals.

While you delay, you are becoming more familiar with the unreceived message and so weakening the power of the gospel.

While you delay, you are adding to the long list of your sins.

While you delay, youth is slipping from you.

Make a mark with a straw on the clay and it abides; hammer on the brick with iron and it only breaks. Youth is a brief season. It is the season for forming

habit, for receiving impressions, for building up character. 'The sluggard will not plough by reason of the cold, therefore shall he beg in harvest and have nothing.' Your present time is seed time. God forbid that I should say that it is impossible, but I do say that it is hard, for 'a man to be born again when he is old.'

If you do become Christ's servant later in life, your whole condition will be different from what it would have been if you had begun when young to trust and love Him. Think of the difficulty of rooting out habits and memories. Think of the horrid familiarity with evil. Think of the painful contrition for wasted years, which must be theirs who are hired at the eleventh hour, after standing all the day idle.

Contrast the experience of him who can say, 'I Thy servant fear God from my youth,' who has been led by God's mercy from childhood in the narrow way, who by early faith in Christ has been kept in the slippery ways of youth.

Of the one we can but say, 'Is not this a brand plucked from the burning?' The other is 'innocent of much transgression.'

I have small hope of changing middle-aged and old men. To you I turn, you young men and women, you children, and to each of you I say, 'Wilt thou not from this time say, My Father, Thou art the guide of my youth?'

III. Life will certainly deepen your early impressions.

The old Barzillai dying looks back to his early days.

So I point the lesson: 'Keep thy heart with all diligence,' and let your early thoughts be bright and pure ones.

Remember that you will never find any love like a

father's and mother's. Don't do what will load your memories in after days with sharp reproaches.

IV. Life will bring you nearer and nearer to the grave.

Hope after hope dies out, and there is nothing left but the hope to die. How beautiful the facing of it so as to become calmly familiar with it, making it an object of hope, with bright visions of reunion!

How can such an old age so bright and beautiful be secured? Surely the one answer is,—by faith in Jesus Christ.

Think of an old Christian resting, full of years, full of memories, full of hopes, to whom the stir of the present is nothing, who has come so near the place where the river falls into the great sea that the sounds on the banks are unheard. It is calm above the cataract, and though there be a shock when the stream plunges over the precipice, yet a rainbow spans the fall, and the river peacefully mingles with the shoreless, boundless ocean.

Dear young friends, 'what shall the end be'? It is for yourselves to settle. Oh, take Christ for your Lord! Then, though so far as regards the bodily life the 'youths shall faint and be weary,' as regards the true self the life may be one of growing maturity, and at last you may 'come to the grave as a shock of corn that is fully ripe.'

Trust, love, and serve Jesus, that thus calm, thus beautiful, may be your days here below, that if you die young you may die ripe enough for heaven, and that if God spares you to 'reverence and the silver hairs,' you may crown a holy life by a peaceful departure, and, sitting in the antechamber of death, may not grieve for the departure of youth and strength and buoyancy and

activity, knowing that 'they also serve who only stand and wait,' and then may shake off the clog and hindrance of old age when you pass into the presence of God, and there, as being the latest-born of heaven, may more than renew your youth, and may enter on a life which weariness and decay never afflict, but with which immortal youth, with its prerogatives of endless hope, of keenest delight, of unwearying novelty, of boundless joy, abides for evermore.

DAVID'S HYMN OF VICTORY

'For Thou hast girded me with strength to battle: them that rose up against me hast Thou subdued under me. 41. Thou hast also given me the necks of mine enemies, that I might destroy them that hate me. 42. They looked, but there was none to save; even unto the Lord, but He answered them not. 43. Then did I beat them as small as the dust of the earth, I did stamp them as the mire of the street, and did spread them abroad. 44. Thou also hast delivered me from the strivings of my people, Thou hast kept me to be head of the heathen; a people which I knew not shall serve me. 45. Strangers shall submit themselves unto me: as soon as they hear, they shall be obedient unto me. 46. Strangers shall ade away, and they shall be afraid out of their close places. 47. The Lord liveth; and blessed be my rock; and exalted be the God of the rock of my salvation. 48. It is God that avengeth me, and that bringeth down the people under me, 49. And that bringeth me forth from mine enemies: Thou also hast lifted me up on high above them that rose up against me: Thou hast delivered me from the violent man. 50. Therefore I will give thanks unto Thee, O Lord, among the heathen, and I will sing praises unto Thy name. 51. He is the tower of salvation for His king; and sheweth mercy to His anointed, unto David, and to his seed for evermore.'—2 SAMUEL xxi. 40-51.

THE Davidic authorship of this great hymn has been admitted even by critics who are in general too slow to recognise it. One of these says that 'there is no Israelite king to whom the expressions in the psalm apply so closely as to David.' The favourite alternative theory that the speaker is the personified nation is hard to accept. The voice of individual trust and of personal experience sounds clear in the glowing words. Two editions of the hymn are preserved for us,—in

Psalm xviii. and 2 Samuel. Slight variations exist in the two copies, which may probably be merely accidental. Nothing important depends on them. The text begins with the closing words of a description of God's arming the singer for his victories, and goes on to paint the tumult of battle and the rout of the foe (verses 40-43); then follows triumphant expectation of future wider victories (verses 44-46); and that leads up to the closing burst of grateful praise (verses 47-51).

I. We are not to forget that what is described in verses 40-43 is a literal fight, with real swords against very real enemies. We may draw lessons of encouragement from it for our conflict with spiritual wickednesses, but we must not lose sight of the bloody combat with flesh and blood which the singer had waged. He felt that God had braced his armour on him, had given him the impenetrable 'shield' which he wore on his arm, and had strengthened his arms to bend the 'bow of steel.' We see him in swift pursuit, pressing hard on the flying foe, crushing them with his fierce charge, trampling them under foot. 'I did beat them small as the dust of the earth.' His blows fell like those of a great pestle, pulverising some substance in a mortar. 'I did stamp them as the mire of the streets,'—a vivid picture of trampling down the prostrate wretches, for which Psalm xviii. gives the less picturesque variant, 'did cast them out.' In their despair the fugitives shriek aloud for God's help, and the Psalmist has a stern joy in knowing their cries to be unheard.

Now, such delight in an enemy's despair and destruction, such gratification at the vanity of his prayers, are far away from being Christian sentiments, and the gulf is not wholly bridged by the consideration that David felt himself to be God's Anointed, and enmity to him

to be, consequently, treason against God. His feelings were most natural and entirely consistent with the stage of revelation in which he lived. They were capable of being purified into that triumph in the victory of good and the ruin of evil without which there is no vigorous sympathy with Christ's conflict. They kindle, by their splendid energy and condensed rapidity, an answering glow even in readers so far away from the scene as we are. But still they do belong to a lower level of feeling, and result from a less full revelation than belongs to Christianity. The light of battle which blazes in them is not the fire which Jesus longed to kindle on earth.

But we may well take a pattern from the stern soldier's recognition that all his victory was due to God alone. The strength that he put forth was God's gift. It was God who subdued the insurgents, not David. The panic which made the foe take to flight was infused into them by God. No name but Jehovah's was to be carved on the trophy reared on the battlefield. The human victor was but the instrument of the divine Conqueror. Such lowly reference of all our power and success to Him will save us from overweening self-adulation, and is the surest way to retain the power which He gives, and which is lost most surely when we take the credit of it to ourselves.

II. The enemies thus far have been from among his own subjects, but in verses 44-46 a transition is made to victory over 'strangers'; that is, foreign nations. The triumph over 'the strivings of my people' heartens the singer to expect that he will be 'head of the nations.' The other version of the hymn (Psalm xviii.) reads simply '*the people.*' The picture of hasty surrender '*as soon as they hear of me*' is graphic. His very name con-

quers. 'The strangers shall submit themselves unto me' is literally 'shall lie,' or yield feigned obedience. They 'fade away,' as if withered by the hot wind of the desert. 'They shall come limping' (as the word here used signifies), as if wounded in the fight, for which Psalm xviii. reads 'trembling.'

Now this vision of extended conquests, based as it is on past smaller victories, carries valuable lessons. David here lays hold of the great promises to his house of a wide dominion, and expects the beginnings of their fulfilment to himself. And he *did* extend his conquests beyond the territory of Israel. But we may take the hope as an instance in a particular direction of what should be the issue of all experience of God's mercies. 'To-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant.' Smaller victories will be followed by greater. Our reception of God's favouring help should widen our anticipations. Our gratitude to Him should be 'a lively sense of favours to come.' Progressive victory should be the experience of every believer.

We may see, too, dimly apparent through the large hope of the Psalmist-King, the prophecy of the world-wide victories of his Son, in whom the great promises of a dominion 'from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth,' are fulfilled.

III. Verses 46-51 make a noble close to a noble hymn, in which the singer's strong wing never flags, nor the rush of thought and feeling ever slackens. In it, even more absolutely than in the rest of the psalm, his victory is all ascribed to Jehovah. He alone acts, David simply receives. To have learned by experience that 'He lives,' and is 'my Rock,' and to gather all the feelings excited by the retrospect of a long life into 'Blessed be my Rock,' is to have reaped and garnered

the richest harvest which earth can yield. So at last sings the man whose early years had been full of struggles and privations. A morning of tempest has cleared into sunny evening calm, as it will with us all if the tempest blows us into our true shelter.

This psalm begins with a rapturous heaping together of the precious names of God, as the singer has had them revealed to him by experience. Foremost among these stands that one, 'my Rock,' which is caught up again in this closing burst of thanksgiving. That great Rock towers unchangeable above fleeting things. The river runs past its base, the woods nestling at its feet bud, and shed their pride of foliage, but it stands the same. David had many a time hid in 'the clefts of the rocks' in his years of wandering, and the figure is eloquent on his lips.

These closing strains gather together once more the main points of the previous verses, his deliverance from domestic foes, and his conquests over external enemies. These are wholly God's work. True thankfulness delights to repeat its acknowledgments. God does not weary of giving, we should not weary of praising the Giver and His gifts. We renew our enjoyment of our long-past mercies by reiterating our thankfulness for them. They do not die as long as gratitude keeps their remembrance green.

But the Psalmist's experience impels him to a vow (verse 50). He will give thanks to God among the nations. God's mercies bind, and, if rightly felt, will joyfully impel, the receiver to spread His name as far as his voice can reach. Love is sometimes silent, but gratitude must speak. The most unmusical voice is tuned to melody by God's great blessings received and appreciated, and they need never want a theme who

can tell what the Lord has done for their souls. 'Then shall . . . the tongue of the dumb sing.' A dumb Christian is a monstrosity. We are 'the secretaries of His praise,' and have been saved ourselves that we may declare His goodness.

Verse 51 has been supposed by some to be a liturgical addition, on the ground that, if David were the author, he would not be likely to name himself thus. But there does not seem to be anything unnatural in his mentioning himself by name in such a connection, and the reference to his dynasty, based as it is on Nathan's promise, is most fitting. The last thought about his mercies which the humble gratitude of the Psalmist utters is that they were not given to him for any good in himself, nor to be selfishly enjoyed, but that they were bestowed on him because of the place that he filled in the divine purposes, and belonged to 'his seed' as truly as to himself. So lowly had his prosperity made him. So truly had he sunk himself in his office, and in the great things that God meant to do through him and his house. We know better than David did what these were, and how the promise on which he rested his hopes of the duration of his house is fulfilled in his Son, whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and who bears God's name to all the nations.

THE DYING KING'S LAST VISION AND PSALM

'Now these be the last words of David. David the son of Jesse said, and the man who was raised up on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, and the sweet psalmist of Israel, said, 2. The Spirit of the Lord spake by me, and His word was in my tongue. 3. The God of Israel said, the Rock of Israel spake to me, He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God. 4. And he shall be as the light of the morning, when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds; as the tender grass springing out of the earth by clear shining after rain. 5. Although my house be not so with God; yet He hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things, and sure: for this is all my salvation, and all my desire, although He make it not to grow. 6. But the sons of Belial shall be all of them as thorns thrust away, because they cannot be taken with hands: 7. But the man that shall touch them must be fenced with iron and the staff of a spear; and they shall be utterly burned with fire in the same place.'—2 SAMUEL xxiii. 1-7.

It was fitting that 'the last words of David' should be a prophecy of the true King, whom his own failures and sins, no less than his consecration and victories, had taught him to expect. His dying eyes see on the horizon of the far-off future the form of Him who is to be a just and perfect Ruler, before the brightness of whose presence and the refreshing of whose influence, verdure and beauty shall clothe the world. As the shades gather round the dying monarch, the radiant glory to come brightens. He departs in peace, having seen the salvation from afar, and stretched out longing hands of greeting toward it. Then his harp is silent, as if the rapture which thrilled the trembling strings had snapped them.

I. We have first a prelude extending to the middle of verse 3. In it there is first a fourfold designation of the personality of the Psalmist-prophet, and then a fourfold designation of the divine oracle spoken through him. The word rendered in verse 1 'saith' is really a noun, and usually employed with 'the Lord' following, as in the familiar phrase 'saith the Lord.' It is used, as here, with the genitive of the human recipient, in Balaam's prophecy, on which this is evi-

dently modelled. It distinctly claims a divine source for the oracle following, and declares, at the outset, that these last words of David were really the faithful sayings of Jehovah. The human and divine elements are smelted together. Note the description of the human personality. First, the natural 'David the son of Jesse,' like 'Balaam the son of Beor' in the earlier oracle. The aged king looks back with adoring thankfulness to his early days and humble birth, as if he were saying, 'Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should proclaim the coming King.' Then follow three clauses descriptive of what 'the son of Jesse' had been made by the grace of God, in that he had been raised on high from his low condition of a shepherd boy, and anointed as ruler, not only by Samuel and the people, but by the God of their great ancestor, whose career had presented so many points of resemblance to his own, the God who still wrought among the nation which bore the patriarch's name, as He had wrought of old; and that, besides his royalty, he had been taught to sing the sweet songs which already were the heritage of the nation. This last designation shows what David counted God's chief gift to him,—not his crown, but his harp. It further shows that he regarded his psalms as divinely inspired, and it proves that already they had become the property of the nation. This first verse heightens the importance of the subsequent oracle by dwelling on the claims of the recipient of the revelation to be heard and heeded.

Similarly, the fourfold designation of the divine source has the same purpose, and corresponds with the four clauses of verse 1, 'The Spirit of the Lord spake in [or "into"] me.' That gives the Psalmist's

consciousness that in his prophecy he was but the recipient of a message. It wonderfully describes the penetrating power of that inward voice which clearly came to him from without, and as clearly spoke to him within. Words could not more plainly declare the prophetic consciousness of the distinction between himself and the Voice which he heard in the depths of his spirit. It spoke in him before he spoke his lyric prophecy. 'His word was upon my tongue.' There we have the utterance succeeding the inward voice, and the guarantee that the Psalmist's word was a true transcript of the inward voice. 'The God of Israel said,' and therefore Israel is concerned in the divine word, which is not of private reference, but meant for all. 'The Rock of Israel spake,' and therefore Israel may trust the Word, which rests on His immutable faithfulness and eternal being.

II. The divine oracle thus solemnly introduced and guaranteed must be worthy of such a prelude. Abruptly, and in clauses without verbs, the picture of the righteous Ruler is divinely flashed before the seer's inward eye. The broken construction may perhaps indicate that he is describing what he beholds in vision. There is no need for any supplement such as 'There shall be,' which, however true in meaning, mars the vividness of the presentation of the Ruler to the prophet's sight. David sees him painted on the else blank wall of the future. When and where the realisation may be he knows not. What are the majestic outlines? A universal sovereign over collective humanity, righteous and God-fearing. In the same manner as he described the vision of the King, David goes on, as a man on some height telling what he saw to the people below, and paints the blessed issues of the King's coming

It had been night before He came,—the night of ignorance, sorrow, and sin,—but His coming is like one of these glorious Eastern sunrises without a cloud, when everything laughs in the early beams, and, with tropical swiftness, the tender herbage bursts from the ground, as born from the dazzling brightness and the fertilising rain. So all things shall rejoice in the reign of the King, and humanity be productive, under His glad and quickening influences, of growths of beauty and fruitfulness impossible to it without these.

The abrupt form of the prophecy has led some interpreters to construe it as, 'When a king over men is righteous . . . then it is as a morning,' etc. But surely such a platitude is not worthy of being David's last word, nor did it need divine inspiration to disclose to him that a just king is a great blessing. The only worthy meaning is that which sees here, in words so solemnly marked as a special revelation closing the life of David, 'the vision of the future and all the wonder that should be,' when a real Person should thus reign over men. The explanation that we have here simply the ideal of the collective Davidic monarchy is a lame attempt to escape from the recognition of prophecy properly so called. It is the work of poetry to paint ideals, of prophecy to foretell, with God's authority, their realisation. The picture here is too radiant to be realised in any mere human king, and, as a matter of fact, never was so in any of David's successors, or in the whole of them put together. It either swings *in vacuo*, a dream unrealised, or it is a distinct prophecy from God of the reign of the coming Messiah, of whom David and all his sons, as anointed kings, were living prophecies. 'The Messianic idea entered on a new stage of development with the

monarchy, and that not as if the history stimulated men's imaginations, but that God used the history as a means of further revelation by His prophetic Spirit.

III. The difficult verse 5, whether its first and last clauses be taken interrogatively or negatively, in its central part bases the assurance of the coming of the king on God's covenant (2 Samuel vii.), which is glorified as being everlasting, provided with all requisites for its realisation, and therefore 'sure,' or perhaps 'preserved,' as if guarded by God's inviolable sanctity and faithfulness. The fulfilment of the dying saint's hopes depends on God's truth. Whatever sense might say, or doubt whisper, he silences them by gazing on that great Word. So we all have to do. If we found our hopes and forecasts on it, we can go down to the grave calmly, though they be not fulfilled, sure that 'no good thing can fail us of all that He hath spoken.' Living or dying, faith and hope must stay themselves on God's word. Happy they whose closing eyes see the form of the King, and whose last thoughts are of God's faithful promise! Happy they whose forecasts of the future, nearer or more remote, are shaped by His word! Happy they who, in the triumphant energy of such a faith, can with dying lips proclaim that His promises overlap, and contain, all their salvation and all their desire!

If we read the first and last clauses negatively, with Revised Version and others, they, as it were, surround the kernel of clear-eyed faith, in the middle of the verse, with a husk, not of doubt, but of consciousness how far the present is from fulfilling the great promise. The poor dying king looks back on the scandals of his later reign, on his own sin, on his children's lust, rebellion, and tragic deaths, and feels how far from

the ideal he and they have been. He sees little token of growth toward realisation of that promise; but yet in spite of a stained past and a wintry present, he holds fast his confidence. That is the true temper of faith, which calls things that are not as though they were, and is hindered by no sense of unworthiness nor by any discouragements born of sense, from grasping with full assurance the promise of God. But the consensus of the most careful expositors inclines to take both clauses as questions, and then the meaning would be, 'Does not my house stand in such a relation to God that the righteous king will spring from it? It is, in this view, a triumphant question, expressing the strongest assurance, and the next clause would then lay bare the foundation of that relation of David's house as not its goodness, but God's covenant ('for He hath made'). Similarly the last clause would be a triumphant question of certainty, asserting in the strongest manner that God would cause that future salvation for the world, which was wrapped up in the coming of the king, and in which the dying man was sure that he should somehow have a share, dead though he were, to blossom and grow, though he had to die as in the winter, before the buds began to swell. The assurance of immortality, and of a share in all the blessings to come, bursts from the lips that are so soon to be silent.

IV. But the oracle cannot end with painting only blessings as flowing from the king's reign. If he is to rule in righteousness and the fear of the Lord, then he must fight against evil. If his coming causes the tender grass to spring, it will quicken ugly growths too. The former representation is only half the truth; and the threatening of destruction for the evil is as

much a part of the divine oracle as the other. Strictly, it is 'wickedness'—the abstract quality rather than the concrete persons who embody it—which is spoken of. May we recall the old distinction that God loves the sinner while He hates the sin? The picture is vivid. The wicked—and all the enemies of this King are wicked, in the prophet's view—are like some of these thorn-brakes, that cannot be laid hold of, even to root them out, but need to be attacked with sharp pruning-hooks on long shafts, or burned where they grow. There is a destructive side to the coming of the King, shadowed in every prophecy of him, and brought emphatically to prominence in his own descriptions of his reign and its final issues. It is a poor kindness to suppress that side of the truth. Thorns as well as tender grass spring up in the quickening beams; and the best commentary on the solemn words which close David's closing song is the saying of the King himself: 'In the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather up first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them.'

THE ROYAL JUBILEE¹

'... He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God. 4. And he shall be as the light of the morning, when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds; as the tender grass springing out of the earth, by clear shining after rain.'—2 SAMUEL xxiii. 3, 4.

ONE of the Psalms ascribed to David sounds like the resolves of a new monarch on his accession. In it the Psalmist draws the ideal of a king, and says such things as, 'I will behave myself wisely, in a perfect way. I will set no wicked thing before mine eyes. I hate the work of them that turn aside. Mine eyes

¹ Preached on the occasion of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee.

shall be upon the faithful of the land, that they may dwell with me.' That psalm we may regard as the first words of the king when, after long, weary years, the promise of Samuel's anointing was fulfilled, and he sat on the throne.

My text comes from what purports to be the last words of the same king. He looks back, and again the ideal of a monarch rises before him. The psalm, for it is a psalm, though it is not in the Psalter, is compressed to the verge of obscurity; and there may be many questions raised about its translation and its bearing. These do not need to occupy us now, but the words which I have selected for my text may, perhaps, best be represented to an English reader in some such sentence as this—'If (or when) one rules over men justly, ruling in the fear of God, then it shall be as the light of the morning when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds.' With such a monarch all the interests of his people will prosper. His reign will be like the radiant dawn of a cloudless day, and his land like the spring pastures when the fresh, green grass is wooed out of the baked earth by the combined influence of rain and sunshine. David's little kingdom was surrounded by giant empires, in which brute force, wielded by despotic will, ground men down, or squandered their lives recklessly. But the King of Israel had learned, partly by the experience of his own reign, and partly by divine inspiration, that such rulers are not true types of a monarch after God's own heart. This ideal king is neither a warrior nor a despot. Two qualities mark him, Justice and Godliness. Pharaoh and his like, oppressors, were as the lightning which blasts and scorches. The true king was to be as the sunshine that vitalises and gladdens. 'He shall come

down like rain upon the mown grass, and as showers that water the earth.'

We do not need to ask the question here, though it might be very relevant on another occasion, whether this portraiture is a mere ideal, floating *in vacuo*, or whether it is a direct prophecy of that expected Messianic king who was to realise the divine ideal of sovereignty. At all events we know that, in its highest and deepest significance, the picture of my text has lived and breathed human breath, in Jesus Christ, who both in His character and in His influence on the world, fulfilled the ideal that floated before the eyes of the aged king.

I do not need to follow the course of thought in this psalm any farther. You will have anticipated my motive for selecting this text now. It seems to me to gather up, in vivid and picturesque form, the thoughts and feelings which to-day are thrilling through an Empire, to which the most extended dominion of these warrior kings of old was but a speck. On such an occasion as this I need not make any apology, I am sure, for diverging from the ordinary topics of pulpit address, and associating ourselves with the many millions who to-day are giving thanks for Queen Victoria.

My text suggests two lines along which the course of our thoughts may run. The one is the personal character of this ideal monarch; the other is its effects on his subjects.

I. Now, with regard to the former, the pulpit is, in my judgment, not the place either for the discussion of current events or the pronouncing of personal eulogiums. But I shall not be wandering beyond my legitimate province, if I venture to try to gather into a

few words the reasons, in the character and public life of our Queen, for the thankfulness of this day. Our text brings out, as I have said, two great qualities as those on which a throne is to be established, Justice and Godliness. Now, the ancient type of monarch was the fountain of justice, in a very direct sense; inasmuch as it was his office, not only to pronounce sentence on criminals, but to give decisions on disputed questions of right. These functions have long ceased to be exercised by our monarchs, but there is still room for both of those qualities—the Justice which holds an even balance between parties and strifes, the Righteousness which has supreme regard to the primary duties that press alike upon prince and pauper, and the Godliness which, as I believe, is the root from which all righteousness, as between man and man, and as between prince and subject, must ever flow. Morality is the garb of religion; religion is the root of morality. He, and only he, will hold an even balance and discharge his obligations to man, whose life is rooted in, and his acts under the continual influence of, the fear of God which has in it no torment, but is the parent of all things good.

We shall not be flatterers if we thankfully recognise in our Sovereign Lady the presence of both these qualities. I have spoken of the first inaugural words of the King of Israel, and the resolutions that he made. It is recorded that when, to the child of eleven years of age, the announcement was made that she stood near in the line of succession to the throne, the tremulous young lips answered, 'It is a great responsibility; but I will be good.' And all round the world to-day her subjects attest that the aged monarch has kept the little maiden's vow. Contrast that life with the lives

of the other women who have sat on the throne of England. Think of the brilliant Queen, whose glories our greatest poets were not ashamed to sing, with the Tudor masterfulness in her, and not a little of the Tudor grossness and passion, and remember the blots that stained her glories. Think of her sister, the morbidly melancholy tool of priests, who goes down the ages branded with an epithet only too sadly earned. Think of another woman that ruled over England in name, the weak instrument of base intrigues. And then turn to this life which we are looking upon to-day. Think of the nameless scandals, the hideous immorality of the reigns that preceded hers, and you will not wonder that every decent man and every modest woman was thankful that, with the young girl, there came a breath of purer air into the foul atmosphere. I am old enough to remember hearing, as a boy, the talk of my elders as to the probabilities of insurrection if, instead of our Queen, there had come to the throne the brother of her two predecessors. The hopes of those early days have been more than fulfilled.

It is not for us to determine the religious character of others, and that is too sacred a region for us to enter; but this we may say, that in all these sixty years of diversified trial, there has been no act known to us outsiders inconsistent with the highest motive, the fear of the Lord; and some of us who have worshipped in the humble Highland church where she has bowed have felt that on the throne of Britain sat a Christian.

Nor need we forget how, from that root of fear of God, there has come that wondrous patience and faithfulness to duty, the form of 'Justice' which is possible for a constitutional monarch. We have little notion of how pressing and numerous and continual the royal

duties must necessarily be. They have been discharged, even when the blow that struck all sunshine out of life left an irrepressible shrinking from pageantry and pomp. Joys come; joys go. Duties abide, and they have been done.

Nor can we forget, either, how the very difficult position of a constitutional monarch, with the semblance of power and the reality of narrow restrictions, has been filled. Our Sovereign has never set herself against the will of the people, expressed by its legitimate representatives, even when that will may have imposed upon her the sanction of changes which she did not approve. And that is much to say. We have seen young despots whose self-will has threatened to wreck a nation's prosperity.

Nor can we forget how all the immense influence of position and personality has been thrown on the side of purity and righteousness. Even we outsiders know how, more than once or twice, she has steadfastly set her face against the admission to her presence of men and women of evil repute, and has in effect repeated David's proclamation against vice and immorality at his accession: 'He that worketh wickedness shall not dwell within my house.'

Nor must we forget, either, the simplicity, the beauty, the tenderness of her wedded and family life, her love of rural quiet, and of wholesome communion with Nature, and her eagerness to take her people into her confidence, as set forth in the book which, whatever its literary merits, speaks of her earnest appreciation of Nature and her wish for the sympathy of her subjects.

Then came the bolt from the blue, that sudden crash that wrecked the happiness of a life. Many of us, I

have no doubt, remember that dreary December Sunday morning when, while the nation was standing in expectation of another calamity from across the Atlantic, there flashed through the land the news of the Prince's death; thrilling all hearts, and bringing all nearer to her, the lonely widow, than they had ever been in her days of radiant happiness. How pathetically, silently, nobly, devoutly, that sorrow has been borne, it is not for us to speak. She has become one of the great company of sad and lonely hearts, and in her sadness has shown an eager desire to send messages of sympathy to all whom she could reach, who were in like darkness and sorrow.

Brethren, I have ventured to diverge so far from the ordinary run of pulpit ministrations because I feel that to-day all of us, whatever may be our political or ecclesiastical relationships and proclivities, are one in thanking God for the monarch whose life has been without a stain, and her reign without a blot.

II. Now let me say a word as to the other line of thought which my text suggests, the effect of such a reign on the condition of the subject.

Now, of course, in the narrowly limited domain of that strange creation, a constitutional monarchy, there is far less opportunity for the Sovereign's direct influence on the Subject than there was in the ancient kingdoms of which David was thinking in his psalm. The marvellous progress of Britain during these sixty years is due, not to our Sovereign, but to a multitude of strenuous workers and earnest thinkers in a hundred different departments, as well as to the evolution of the gifts that come down to us from our ancient inheritance of freedom. But we shall much mistake

if, for that reason, we set aside the monarch's character and influence as of no account in the progress.

A supposition, which is a violent one, may be made which will set this matter in clearer light. Suppose that during these sixty years we had had a king on the throne of England like some of the kings we have had. The sentiment of loyalty is not now of such a character as that it will survive a vicious sovereign. If we had had such a monarch as I have hinted at, the loyalty of the good would for all these years have been suffering a severe strain, and the forces that make for evil would have been disastrously strengthened. Dangers escaped are unnoticed, but one twelvemonth of the reign of a profligate would shake the foundations of the monarchy, and would open the floodgates of vice; and we should then know how much the nation owed to the Queen whose life was pure, and who cast all her influence on the side of 'things that are lovely and of good report.'

Take another supposition. Suppose that during these years of wonderful transition, when the whole aspect of English politics and society has been transformed, we had had a king like George III., who set his opinion against the nation's will constitutionally expressed. Then no man knows with what storm and tumult, with what strife and injury, the inevitable transition would have been effected. Be sure of this, that the wise self-effacement of our Sovereign during these critical years of change is largely the reason why they have been years of peace, in which the new has mingled itself with the old without revolution or disturbance. It is due to her in a very large degree that

'Freedom broadens slowly down
From precedent to precedent.'

I need not dilate on the changed Britain that she looks out upon and rules to-day. I need not speak—there will be many voices to do that, in not altogether agreeable notes, for there will be a dash of too much self-complacency in them—about progress in material wealth, colonial expansion, the increase of education, the gentler manners, the new life that has been breathed over art and literature, the achievements in science and philosophy, the drawing together of classes, the bridging over of the great gulf between rich and poor by some incipient and tentative attempts at sympathy and brotherhood.

Nor need I dwell upon the ecclesiastical signs of the times, in which, mingled as they are, there is at least this one great good, that never since the early days have so large a proportion of Christian men been 'seeking after the things that make for peace,' and realising the oneness of all believers who hold the Headship of Christ.

All this review falls more properly into other hands than mine. Only I would put in a caution—do not let us mingle self-conceit with our congratulations; and, above all, do not let us 'rest and be thankful.' There is much to be done yet. Listening ears can catch on every side vague sounds that tell of unrest and of the stirrings into wakefulness of

'The spirit of the years to come,
Yearning to mix itself with life.'

I seem to hear all around me the rushing in the dark of a mighty current that is bearing down upon us. Great social questions are rapidly coming to the front—the questions of distribution of wealth, abolition of privilege, the relations of labour and capital, and many

others are clamant to be dealt with at least, if not solved. There is much to be done before Jesus Christ is throned as King of England. War has to be frowned down; the brotherhood of man has to be realised, temperance has to be much more largely practised than it is.

I need not go over the catalogue of *desiderata*, of *agenda*—things that have to be done—in the near future. Only this I would say—Christian men and women are the last people who should be ready to ‘rest and be thankful,’ for the principles of the Gospel that we profess, which have never been applied to the life of nations as they ought to be, will solve the questions which make the despair of so many in this generation. We shall best express our thankfulness for these past sixty years by each of us taking our part in the great movement which, in the inevitable drift of things to democracy, is going to ‘cast the kingdom old into another mould,’ and which will, I pray, make our people more of what John Milton long ago called them, ‘God’s Englishmen.’ We have taught the nations many things. Our Parliament is called the Mother of Parliaments. Ours is

‘The land where, girt with friends or foes,
A man may say the thing he will.’

It has taught the nations a tempered freedom, and that a monarchy may be a true republic. May we rise to the height of our privileges and responsibilities, and teach our subject peoples, not only mechanics, science, law, free trade, but a loftier morality, and the name of Him by whom kings reign and princes decree justice!

We, members of the free Churches of England, come seldom under the notice of royalty, and have little

acquaintance with courts, but we yield to none in our recognition of the virtues and in our sympathy with the sorrows of the Sovereign Lady, the good woman, who rules these lands, and we all heartily thank God for her to-day, and pray that for long years still to come the familiar letters V.R. may stand, as they have stood to two generations, as the symbol of womanly purity and of the faithful discharge of queenly duty.

A LIBATION TO JEHOVAH

'And David longed, and said, Oh that one would give me drink of the water of the well of Beth-lehem, which is by the gate! 16. And the three mighty men brake through the host of the Philistines, and drew water out of the well of Beth-lehem, that was by the gate, and took it and brought it to David: nevertheless he would not drink thereof, but poured it out unto the Lord. 17. And he said, Be it far from me, O Lord, that I should do this; is not this the blood of the men that went in jeopardy of their lives? therefore he would not drink it. These things did these three mighty men.'—2 SAMUEL xxiii, 15-17.

DAVID'S fortunes were at a low ebb. He was in hiding in his cave of Adullam, and a Philistine garrison held Bethlehem, his native place. He was little different from an outlaw at the head of a band of 'broken men,' but there were depths of chivalry and poetry in his heart. Sweltering in his cave in the fierce heat of harvest, he thought of his native Bethlehem; he remembered the old days when he had watered his flock at the well by its gate, or mingled with the people of the little town, in their evening assemblies round it. The memories of boyhood rose up radiant before him, and as he was immersed in the past, the grim present, the perils that threatened his life, the savage, gaunt rocks without a trace of greenness that girded him, the privations to which he was exposed, were all forgotten, and he longed for one more draught of the water that tasted so cool and sweet to memory. Three of his 'mighty men,' bound to him by loyal devotion and unselfish love, were

ready to die to win for their chief a momentary gratification. So they slipped away from Adullam, 'brake through the host of the Philistines,' and brought back the longed-for draught. David's reception of the dearly-bought, sparkling gift was due to a noble impulse. The water seemed to him to be dyed with blood, and to be not water so much as 'lives of men.' It had become too precious to be used to satisfy his longing. It would be base self-indulgence to drink what had been won by such self-forgetting devotion. God only had the right to receive what men had risked their lives to obtain, and therefore he 'poured it out unto the Lord.'

The story gleams out of the fierce narratives in which it is embedded, like a flower blooming on some grim cliff. May we not learn lessons from it?

I. David's longing.

David, a fugitive in the cave, haunted by the 'nostalgia' that made Bethlehem seem so fair and dear, may stand for us as an example of the longings and thirsts that sometimes force themselves into consciousness in every soul. Below the bustle and strife of daily life, occupied as it must be with material and often ignoble things, below the hardness into which the world has compressed men's surface nature, there lies a yearning for the cool water that rises hard by the gate of our native home. True, it is with many of us overlaid for the most part by coarser desires, and may be as unlike our usual dominant longings and aims, as David's tender outbreak of sentiment was to the prevailing tenor of his life, in those days when he was an outlaw and a freebooter. But the longing, though often stifled, is not wholly quenched. It is misinterpreted by the man who is conscious of it, and far too often he tries to slake the thirst by fiery and drugged

liquors which but make it more intense. Happy are they who know what it is that their parched palates crave, and have learned, while yet the knowledge avails, to say, 'My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God'! 'Blessed are they who thirst after' the water of the well of Bethlehem, 'for they shall be filled!'

II. The three heroes' devotion.

These three rough soldiers, lawless and fierce as they were, had been so mastered by their chief that they were ready to dare anything to pleasure him. Who would have looked for such delicacy of feeling and such enthusiastic self-surrender in such men?

They stand as grand instances of the height of devotion of which the rudest nature is capable, when once its love and loyalty to the Beloved are evoked.

How such deeds ennoble the lowest types of character, and make us think better of men, and more sadly of the contrast between their habitual characteristics and the possibilities that lie slumbering in their ignoble lives! There are sparks in the hard cold flint, if only they could be struck out. There is water in the rock, if only the right hand, armed with the wonder-working rod, smites it.

Let us not judge men too harshly by what they do and are, but let us try to bring their sleeping possibilities into conscious exercise.

Let us remember that love and self-sacrifice, which is the very outcome and natural voice of love, ennoble the most degraded.

But these heroic three may suggest to us a sadder thought. They were ready to die for David; would they have been as ready to die for God? These noble emotions of love, leading to glad flinging away of life to pleasure the beloved, are freely given to men, but

too often withheld from God. We lavish on our beloveds, or on our chosen leaders, a devotion that ought to shame us, when contrasted with the scantiness of our grudging devotion and self-surrender to Him. If we loved God a tenth part as ardently as we love our wives or husbands or parents or children, and were willing to do and bear as much for Him as we are willing to bear for them, how different our lives would be! We can love utterly, enthusiastically, self-forgetingly, absorbed in the beloved, and counting all surrender of self to, and the sacrifice of life itself for, him or her a delight. Many of us do love men so. Do we love God so?

But these heroic three may suggest another thought. Their self-sacrificing love was illustrious; but there is a nobler, more wonderful, more soul-subduing instance of such love. They broke through the ranks of the Philistines to bring David a draught from the well of Bethlehem. Jesus has broken through the ranks of our enemies to bring us the water of which 'if a man drink, he shall live for ever.' If we would see the highest example of self-sacrificing love, we must turn to look, not on the instances of it that shine through the ages on the page of history, and make men thrill as they gaze, and think better of the human nature that can do such things, but on the Christ hanging on the Cross because He loved those who did not love Him, and giving His life a ransom for sinners.

III. David's reception of the water.

The chivalrous devotion of the three touched an answering chord in their chivalrous chief. His heart filled at the thought of what they had risked, and revolted from employing what had been thus won for no higher use than to gratify a piece of sentiment in

himself. The sparkling water was too sacred to be taken for any baser use than as a libation to Jehovah. And who can doubt that the three were more fully repaid for their devotion, as David poured it out unto the Lord, than if he had drunk it eagerly up? His feeling and his act indicate beautiful delicacy of instinct, and swiftness of perception of how to requite the devotion of the three.

We may separate into its two parts the generous impulse which sprang as one whole in David's breast. There was the shrinking from using the water to slake his thirst merely, and there was the resolve to pour it out as a libation to God. Both parts of that whole may yield us profitable thoughts.

To risk their lives for the water was noble in the three; to have quaffed it as if it had been drawn like any other water from a well, would have been ignoble in David. There are things that it may be noble to give and ignoble to accept. There are sacrifices which we are not entitled to allow others to make for our sakes. Gratifications which can only be procured at the hazard of men's lives are too dearly bought.

Would not a civilisation, that draws much of its comforts and appliances from 'sweated industries,' and is languidly amused by seeing men and women performers peril their lives nightly, and lose them too, for its gratification, be the better for copying David's recoil from drinking 'the blood of men that went in jeopardy of their lives'? Is there not 'blood' on many a woman's ball-dress, on many an article of luxury, on many an amusement?

There are sacrifices which we have no right to accept from others. The three had no right to risk life for such a purpose, and David would have been selfish if

he had drunk the water. Do not such thoughts lead us by contrast to Him who has done what none other can do? 'None of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give his life a ransom for him'; but Jesus can and Jesus does, and what it would be impossible, and wrong if it were possible, for one man to do for another, He has done for us all, and what it would be base for a man to accept from another if that other could give it, it is blessed and the beginning of all nobleness of character for us to accept from Him. David would not drink because the cup seemed to him to be red with blood. Jesus offers to us a cup, not of cold water only but of 'water and blood,' and bids us drink of it and remember Him.

The generous devotion of the three kindled answering emotions in David's breast. It would be a churlish soul that was not warmed into some faint replica of such self-sacrifice, and most of us would be ashamed of ourselves if we were unmoved by such love. But does the supreme example of it affect us as much as the lesser examples of it do? How many of us stand before it like the peaks of the Alps that front full south, and lift an unmelted breastplate of snow to the midday sun! How many of us have lived all our lives in presence of Jesus' infinite love and self-surrender for us each, and never have felt one transient touch of answering love!

The other part of David's impulse was to offer to God what was too precious for his own use. That is the fitting destination of our most precious and prized possessions. And whatever is thus offered becomes more precious by being offered. The altar sanctifies and enhances the worth of the gift. What we give to God is more our own than if we had kept it to ourselves, and develops richer capacities of ministering to

our delight. It is so with our greatest surrender, the surrender of ourselves. When we give ourselves to Jesus, He renders us back to ourselves, far better worth having than before. We are never so much our own as when we are wholly Christ's. And the same thing is true as to all our riches of mind, heart, or worldly wealth. If we wish to taste their most delicate and refined sweetness, let us give them to Jesus, and the touch of His hand, as He accepts them and gives them back to us, will leave a lingering fragrance that nothing else can impart. Was not the water from the well of Bethlehem sweeter to David as he poured it out unto the Lord than if he had greedily gulped it down?

THE FIRST BOOK OF KINGS

DAVID APPOINTING SOLOMON

'Then king David answered and said, Call me Bath-sheba. And she came into the king's presence, and stood before the king. 29. And the king sware, and said, As the Lord liveth, that hath redeemed my soul out of all distress, 30. Even as I sware unto thee by the Lord God of Israel, saying, Assuredly Solomon thy son shall reign after me, and he shall sit upon my throne in my stead; even so will I certainly do this day. 31. Then Bath-sheba bowed with her face to the earth, and did reverence to the king, and said, Let my lord king David live for ever. 32. And king David said, Call me Zadok the priest, and Nathan the prophet, and Benaiah the son of Jehoiada. And they came before the king. 33. The king also said unto them, Take with you the servants of your lord, and cause Solomon my son to ride upon mine own mule, and bring him down to Gihon: 34. And let Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet anoint him there king over Israel: and blow ye with the trumpet, and say, God save king Solomon. 35. Then ye shall come up after him, that he may come and sit upon my throne; for he shall be king in my stead; and I have appointed him to be ruler over Israel and over Judah. 36. And Benaiah the son of Jehoiada answered the king, and said, Amen: the Lord God of my lord the king say so too. 37. As the Lord hath been with my lord the king, even so be he with Solomon, and make his throne greater than the throne of my lord king David. 38. So Zadok the priest, and Nathan the prophet, and Benaiah the son of Jehoiada, and the Cherethites, and the Pelethites, went down, and caused Solomon to ride upon king David's mule, and brought him to Gihon. 39. And Zadok the priest took an horn of oil out of the tabernacle, and anointed Solomon. And they blew the trumpet; and all the people said, God save king Solomon.'—1 KINGS i. 28-39.

THE earlier part of this chapter must be taken into account in order to get the right view of this incident. David's eldest surviving son, Adonijah, had claimed the succession, and gathered his partisans to a feast. Nathan, alarmed at the prospect of such a successor, had arranged with Bathsheba that she should go to David and ask his public confirmation of his promise to her that Solomon should succeed him, and that then Nathan should seek an audience while she was with the king, and, as independently, should prefer the same request.

The plan was carried out, and here we see its

results. The old king was roused to a flash of his ancient vigour, confirmed his oath to Bathsheba, and promptly cut the ground from under Adonijah's feet by sending for the three who had remained true to him—Nathan, Benaiah, and Zadok—and despatching them without a moment's delay to proclaim Solomon king, and then to bring him up to the palace and enthrone him. The swift execution of these decisive orders, and the burst of popular acclamation which welcomed Solomon's accession, shattered the nascent conspiracy, and its supporters scattered in haste, to preserve their lives. The story may be best dealt with, for our purpose, by taking this brief summary and trying to draw lessons from it.

I. It points anew the truth that 'whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.' As Absalom, so Adonijah, had been spoiled by David's over-indulgence (verse 6), and having never had his wishes checked, was now letting his unbridled wishes hurry him into rebellion. Nor was that fault of David's the only one which brought about the miserable squabbles round his deathbed, as to who should wear the crown which had not yet fallen from his head. Eastern monarchies are familiar with struggles for the crown between the sons of different mothers when their father dies. David had indulged in a multitude of wives, and his last days were darkened by the resulting intrigues of his sons. No doubt, too, Solomon was disliked by his brethren as the child of Bathsheba, and the shame of David's crime was an obstacle in his younger son's way. Thus, as ever, his evil deeds came home to roost, and the poisonous seed which he had sown grew up and waved, a bitter harvest, which he had to reap. Repentance and forgiveness did not neutralise the natural

consequences of his sin. Nor will they do so for us. God often leaves them to be experienced, that the experience may make us hate the sins the more.

II. The sad defection to Adonijah of such tried friends as Joab and Abiathar has its lesson. The reason for Joab's treachery is plain. He had been steadily drifting away from David for years. His fierce temper could not brook the king's displeasure on account of his murders of Abner and Amasa, and his slaying of Absalom had made the breach irreparable. No doubt, David had made him feel that he loved and trusted him no longer; and his old comrade in many a fight, Benaiah, had stepped into the place which he had once filled. Professional rivalry had darkened into bitter hate. Joab commanded the native-born Israelites; Benaiah, the 'Cherethites and Pelethites,' who are now generally regarded as foreign mercenaries. They were David's bodyguard, and were probably as heartily hated by Joab and the other Israelite soldiers as they were trusted by David. So there were reasons enough for Joab's abetting an insurrection which would again make him the foremost soldier. He wanted to be indispensable, and would prop the throne as long as its occupant looked only to him as its defender. Besides, he probably felt that he would have little chance of winning distinction in a kingdom which was to be a peaceful one.

Abiathar's motives are unexplained, but if we notice that he had been obliged to acquiesce in the irregular arrangement of putting the high-priest's office into commission, we can understand that he bore no goodwill to Zadok, his colleague, or to David for making the latter so. Self was at the bottom of these two renegades' action. The fair fellowship, which had been

made the closer because of dangers and privations faced together, crumbled away before the disintegrating influences of petty personal jealousies. When once self-regard gets in, it is like the trickle of water in the cracks of a rock, which freezes in winter and splits the hardest stone. No common action for a great cause is possible without the suppression of sidelong looks towards private advantage. Joab and Abiathar tarnished a life's devotion and broke sacred bonds, because they thought of themselves rather than of God's will. Surely they must have had some pangs as they sat at Adonijah's feast, when they thought of the decrepit old king lying in his chamber up on Zion, and remembered what he and they had come through together.

III. We may note the pathetic picture of decaying old age which is seen in David. He was not very old in years, being about seventy, but he was a worn-out man. His early hardships had told on him, and now he lay in the inner chamber, the shadow of himself. His love for Bathsheba had died down, as would appear both from her demeanour before him, and from her ignorance of his intentions as to his successor. She was little or nothing to him now. He seems to have been torpidly unaware of what was going on. The noise of Adonijah's revels had not disturbed his quiet. He had not even taken the trouble to designate his successor, though 'the eyes of all Israel were upon him that he should tell who was to sit on his throne after him' (v. 20). Such neglect was criminal in the circumstances, and brings out forcibly the weary indifference which had crept over him. Contrast that picture with the early days of swift energy and eager interest in all things. Is this half-comatose old man the David who flashed like a meteor and struck swift as

a thunderbolt but a few years before? Yes, and a like collapse of power befalls us all, if life is prolonged. Those who most need the lesson will be least touched by it; but let not the young glory in their strength, for it soon fades away; and let them give the vigour of their early days to God, that, when the years come in which they shall say, 'I have no pleasure in them,' they may be able, like David, to look back over a long life and say, with him, that the Lord 'hath redeemed my soul out of all adversity.'

IV. We note the flash of fire which blazed up in the dying embers of David's life. The old lion could be roused yet, and could strike when roused. It took much to shake him out of his torpor. Nathan's plan of bringing the double influence of Bathsheba and himself to bear was successful beyond what he had hoped. All that they desired was a formal declaration of Solomon as successor. They knew that the king's name was still dear enough to all Israel to ensure that his wish would settle the succession; and they would have been content to have left the actual entrance of Solomon on office till after David's death, so sure were they that his word was still a spell. But the old king, shaking off his languor, as a lion does the drops from his mane, goes beyond their wishes, and strikes one decisive blow as with a great paw, and no second is needed. Without a moment's delay, he sends for the trusty three, and bids them act on the instant. So down to Gihon goes the procession, with the youthful prince seated on his father's mule, in token of his accession, the trusty bodyguard round him with Benaiah at their head, and the great prophet Nathan, side by side with the high-priest Zadok, representing the divine sanction of the solemn act.

It would take stronger men than the spoiled Adonijah and his revellers to upset anything which that determined company resolved to do. The lad is anointed with the holy oil which Zadok as high-priest had the right to bring forth from the temporary sanctuary. That signified and effected the communication from above of qualifications for the kingly office, and indicated divine appointment. Then out blared the trumpets, and the glad people shouted 'God save the king!' What thoughts filled the young heart of Solomon as he stood silent there his vision in Gibeon may partly tell. But the distant roar of acclaim reached Adonijah and his gang as they sat at their too hasty banquet.

They had begun at the wrong end. The feast should have closed, not inaugurated, the dash for the crown. They who feast when they should fight are likely to end their mirth with sorrow. David's one stroke was enough. They were as sure as Nathan and Bathsheba had been that the declaration of his wish would carry all Israel with it, and so they saw that the game was up, and there was a rush for dear life. The empty banqueting-hall proclaimed the collapse of a rebellion which had no brains to guide it, and no reason to justify it. Let us learn that, though 'the race is not always to the swift,' promptitude of action, when we are sure of God's will, is usually a condition of success. Life is too short, and the work to be done too pressing and great, to allow of dawdling. 'I made haste, and delayed not, but made haste to keep Thy commandments.' Let us learn, too, from Adonijah's fiasco, to see the end of a thing before we commit ourselves to it, and to have the work done first before we think of the feast.

Nathan and Bathsheba and David all believed that God had willed Solomon's succeeding to the throne. No doubt, the reason for their belief was the divine word to David through Nathan (2 Samuel vii. 12), which designated a son not yet born as his successor, and therefore excluded Adonijah as well as Absalom. But, while they believed this, they did not therefore let Adonijah work his will, and leave God to carry out His purposes. Their belief animated their action. They knew what God willed, and therefore they worked strenuously to effect that will. We may bewilder our brains with speculations about the relation between God's sovereignty and man's freedom, but, when it comes to practical work, we have to put out the best and most that is in us to prevent God's will from being thwarted by rebellious men, and to ensure its being carried into effect through our efforts, 'for we are God's fellow-workers.'

A YOUNG MAN'S WISE CHOICE OF WISDOM

'In Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night: and God said, Ask what I shall give thee. 6. And Solomon said, Thou hast shewed unto Thy servant David my father great mercy, according as he walked before Thee in truth, and in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart with Thee; and Thou hast kept for him this great kindness, that Thou hast given him a son to sit on his throne, as it is this day. 7. And now, O Lord my God, Thou hast made Thy servant king instead of David my father: and I am but a little child: I know not how to go out or come in. 8. And Thy servant is in the midst of Thy people which Thou hast chosen, a great people, that cannot be numbered nor counted for multitude. 9. Give therefore Thy servant an understanding heart to judge Thy people, that I may discern between good and bad: for who is able to judge this Thy so great a people? 10. And the speech pleased the Lord, that Solomon had asked this thing. 11. And God said unto him, Because thou hast asked this thing, and hast not asked for thyself long life; neither hast asked riches for thyself, nor hast asked the life of thine enemies; but hast asked for thyself understanding to discern judgment; 12. Behold, I have done according to thy words: lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart; so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee. 13. And I have also given thee that which thou hast not asked, both riches and honour: so that there shall not be any among the kings like unto thee all thy days. 14. And if thou wilt walk in My ways, to keep My statutes and My commandments, as thy father David did walk

then I will lengthen thy days. 15. And Solomon awoke; and, behold, it was a dream. And he came to Jerusalem, and stood before the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and offered up burnt offerings, and offered peace offerings, and made a feast to all his servants.—1 KINGS iii. 5-15.

THE new king was apparently some nineteen or twenty years old on his accession. He stepped at once out of seclusion and idleness to bear the whole weight of the kingdom. The glories of David's reign, his brother Adonijah's pretensions to the crown, the smouldering hostility of Saul's old partisans, made his position difficult and his throne unsteady. No doubt, 'the weight of too much dignity' pressed on the youth, and this dream found a point of origin in his waking thoughts. God does not thus reveal Himself to men who seek Him not; and the offer in the vision is but the repetition of what Solomon felt in many a waking moment of meditation that God was saying to him, and the choice he makes in it is the choice that he had already made. He who seeks wisdom first is already wise.

I. Note the wide possibilities opened by the divine offer. Our narrative brings that gracious offer into connection with Solomon's lavish sacrifice before 'the Tabernacle at Gibeon. 'God loveth a cheerful giver,' and because these thousand burnt offerings meant devotion and thankfulness, therefore He who lets no man be the poorer for what he gives to Him, and is honoured most, not by our givings to, but by our takings from Him, comes in the quiet night, and puts the key of all His treasures into the young king's hands. In a very real sense this divine voice is but the putting into words of the fact as to every young life. The all but boundless possibilities before every young man and woman give solemnity to their position, which they too often do not recognise till youth is past. The future lies blank before them, ready to receive what they

choose to write on its page. Once written, it is indelible. They are still free from the limitations of habit and associations. They have still the capacity and the opportunity of choice. There are limits, of course, but still it is scarcely exaggeration to say that a man may become almost anything he likes, if he strongly wills it when young, and sticks to his resolve. When the liquid iron flows from the blast furnace, it may be run into any mould; but it soon cools and hardens, and obstinately keeps its shape, in spite of hammers.

If young men and women could but see the possibilities of their youth, and the issues that hang on early choice, as clearly as they will see them some day, there would be fewer wasted mornings of life and fewer gloomy sunsets. But the misery is that so many do not choose at all, but just let things slide, and allow themselves to be moulded by whatever influence happens to be strongest. For one man who goes wrong by deliberate choice, with open eyes, there are twenty who simply drift. Unfortunately, there is more evil than good in the world; and if a lad takes his colour from his surroundings, the chances are terribly against his coming to anything high, noble, or pure. This world is no place for a man who cannot say 'No.' If we are like the weeds in a stream, and let it decide which way we shall point, we shall be sure to point downwards. It would do much to secure the choice of the Good, if there were a clear recognition by all young persons of the fact that they have the choice to make, and are really making it unconsciously. If they could be brought, like Solomon, to put their ruling wish into plain words, many who are not ashamed to yield to unworthy desires would be ashamed to speak them out baldly. Let each ask himself, 'Suppose that I

had to say out what I want most, dare I avow before my own conscience, to say nothing of God, what it is?

Looked at from a somewhat different point of view, God's offer to Solomon presupposes God's knowledge and approval of his wishes. He does not give blank cheques to those whom He cannot trust to fill them up rightly. When James and John tried to commit Jesus to a blind promise 'that Thou shouldest do for us whatsoever we shall ask of Thee,' their answer was a question as to what they wished. 'Delight thyself also in the Lord, and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart.' God loves us too well to let us have *carte blanche* unless our wills run parallel with His. He is a foolish and cruel father who promises compliance with all his child's unknown wishes. Not such is our Father's loving discipline. It is to those who 'abide in Christ,' and have Him abiding in them, moulding their longings and prayers, that the great promise is sealed: 'Ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.'

II. Note next the wise choice of wisdom. 'Had not Solomon been wise before, he had not known the worth of wisdom. The dunghill cocks of this world cannot know the price of this pearl; those that have it know that all other excellencies are but trash and rubbish unto it.' Solomon's prayer shows the temper with which he entered on his reign. There is no exultation; his serious and clear-eyed spirit sees in rule a heavy task. He contrasts his inexperienced rawness with the 'truth and righteousness' and veteran maturity of his great predecessor, and trembles to think that he, a mere lad, sits on David's throne. But he pleads with God that He has made him king, and implies that therefore God is bound to fit him for his office. That is the boldness permitted to faith,—to remind God of His

own past acts, which pledge Him to give what He has put us into circumstances to need. With beautiful humility, Solomon dwells on his youth and inexperience, and on the vastness of the charge laid on him. All these considerations are the motives for his choice of a gift, and also pleas with God to grant his request.

He asks for the practical wisdom needed for ruling in these old days, when the king was judge as well as ruler and captain. Was this the highest gift that he could have asked or received? Surely the deep longings of his father for communion with God were yet better. No doubt the 'wisdom' of the Book of Proverbs is religion and morality as well as true thinking, but the 'understanding heart to judge Thy people' which Solomon asked and received is narrower and more secular in its meaning. There is no sign in his biography that he ever had the deep inward devotion of his father. After the poet-psalmist came the prosaic and keen-sighted shrewd man of affairs. The one breathed his ardent soul into psalms, which feed devotion to-day; the other crystallised his discernment in 'three thousand proverbs,' and, though his 'songs were one thousand and five,' they touched a lower range, both of poetry and religious feeling, than his father's, as may be expressed by calling them 'songs,' not 'psalms.'

But though the request is not the highest, it may well be taken as a pattern by the young. Note the view of his position from which it rises. To Solomon dignity meant duty; and his crown was not a toy, but a task. The responsibilities, not the enjoyments, of his station were uppermost in his mind. That is the only right view to take. Youth is meant to be enthusiastic, and to feed its aspirations on noble ideals, and if, instead of that, it does as too many do, especially in countries where

wealth abounds, namely, regards life as a garden of delights, or sometimes as a sty where young men may wallow in 'pleasures,' then farewell to all hopes of high achievements or of an honourable career. Youthful ideals will fade fast enough; but alas for the life which had none to begin with! Note the sense of insufficiency for his task. Youth is prone to be over-confident, and to think that it can do better than its fathers, who were as confident in their time. There is a false humility which flattens the spirit and keeps from plain duty; and there is a true lowliness which feels that the task must be attempted, though the heart may shrink, and which impels to prayer for fitness not its own. He who tells God his consciousness of impotence, and asks Him to supply His strength to its weakness and His wisdom to its inexperience, will never shirk work because it is too great, nor ever fail to find power according to his need.

III. Note God's answer. Solomon gets his wish, and much which he had not asked besides. The divine answer is in two parts. First, the reasons for the large gift; and second, the details of the gift. His not wishing material good was the very reason why he obtained it. That is not always so; for often enough a man whose whole nature is sharpened to one point, in the intensity of his desire to make money, will succeed. But what then? He will be none the better, but the poorer, for his wealth. But this is always true,—that the people who do not make worldly good their first object are the people who can be most safely trusted with it, and who get most enjoyment out of it. Whether in the precise form of the gift to Solomon or not, outward good does attend a life which sets duty before pleasure, and desires most to be able to do it. All earthly

good is exalted by being put second, and degraded as well as corrupted by being put first. The water lapped up in the palm, as the soldier marches, is sweeter than the abundant draughts swilled down by self-indulgence. 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God, . . . and all these things shall be added unto you.'

Note the largeness of the gift. When God is pleased with a man's prayers, He gives more than was asked, and so teaches us to be ashamed of the smallness of our expectations, and widens our desires by His overlapping bestowments. First, He gives the wisdom asked. Dependence on God, rising from the sense of our own ignorance, has a wonderful power of bringing illumination, even as to small matters of practical duty. Solomon asked it, to guide him in his judicial decisions; and the first case to which it was applied, when received, was a miserable quarrel between two disreputable women. A devout heart, purged from self-conceit, is often gifted with a piercing wisdom before which the crafty shrewdness of the world is abashed. We cannot be 'wise as serpents' unless we are 'harmless as doves.' The world may think such 'wisdom' folly, but she will be 'justified of her children.' Is the saying of James's Epistle a reminiscence of Solomon's dream, 'If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, . . . and it shall be given him'?

Then follows the grant of the unasked goods,—riches, honour, and length of days. Surely we hear an echo of these promises in that magnificent description of Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs: 'Length of days is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honour.' These and similar gifts may or may not follow our choice of divine wisdom as our truest good. If we have really chosen it, we shall regard them as

make-weights, to be thankfully received and rightly used, but not as indispensable. If we pursue wisdom for the sake of getting these, we shall lose both it and them. If we have set our desires most earnestly on the most worthy things, which are God's love and a character hallowed by His grace, we shall be rich indeed, whether what the world calls wealth be ours or no; and our days will be long enough if in them we have been prepared for the fuller wisdom and undying life of heaven.

Solomon realised his youthful aspirations. The only way to be sure of getting what we wish, is to wish what God desires to give,—even Himself,—and to ask it of Him. Solomon, like many a young man, outgrew his early 'dream.' Was he happier or wiser when he was a worn-out voluptuary, smiling with cynical scorn at his young self, or when, with generous enthusiasm, he felt the solemnity of life and the awfulness of duty, and asked God to help his insufficiency? Was not the dream truer and more real than the waking hours of profligacy and unreal 'enjoyment'?

THE GREAT GAIN OF GODLINESS

* And Judah and Israel dwelt safely, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, from Dan even to Beer-sheba, all the days of Solomon. 26. And Solomon had forty thousand stalls of horses for his chariots, and twelve thousand horsemen. 27. And those officers provided victual for king Solomon, and for all that came unto king Solomon's table, every man in his month: they lacked nothing. 28. Barley also and straw for the horses and dromedaries brought they unto the place where the officers were, every man according to his charge. 29. And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding exceeding much, and largeness of heart, even as the sand that is on the sea shore. 30. And Solomon's wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east country, and all the wisdom of Egypt. 31. For he was wiser than all men; than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, and Chalcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol: and his fame was in all nations round about. 32. And he spake three thousand proverbs: and his songs were a thousand and five. 33. And he spake of trees, from the cedar tree that is in Lebanon even unto the hyssop that springeth out of the wall: he spake also of beasts, and of fowl.

and of creeping things, and of fishes. 34. And there came of all people to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all kings of the earth, which had heard of his wisdom.'—1 KINGS IV. 25-34.

THE glories of Solomon's reign kindle the writer of this Book of Kings to patriotic enthusiasm, all the more touching if, as is probable, he wrote during Israel's exile. The fair vision of the past would make the sad present still sadder. But it is not patriotism only which guides his pen; he recognises that Solomon's glory was the result of Solomon's religion, and by portraying it he would teach the eternal truth that godliness hath 'promise of the life that now is' as well as 'of that which is to come.' The passage brings out three characteristics of Solomon's reign and character: the peace enjoyed by Israel during his time, his wealth, and his wisdom.

I. That beautiful phrase for a time of secure enjoyment of modest, material good in a simple state of agricultural society, 'dwelt safely, every man under his vine and under his fig tree,' occurs frequently in the Old Testament, and breathes the very essence of a calm life of rural felicity and restful enjoyment of wholesome joys. How different from the feverish ideal predominant in our great cities to-day! Which is the nobler and the more likely to yield abiding content and to be the ally of high and serious thought—this antique picture of leisurely, unambitious lives, or the scramble for wealth which destroys repose, and is so busy getting that it has no time either rightly to enjoy, or nobly to expend, its wealth? Those who have their country's truest prosperity at heart may well sigh for the return of the vanished ideal of Solomon's days; and those who would make the most of themselves must in some measure seek to conform their own lives to it.

But another view may be taken of this picture of

national prosperity. Remember the time at which it was painted,—a time when the prosperity of a nation was thought to consist in conquest, and when the arts of peace were despised. How far beyond his era was the king who set his highest glory in securing for his people tranquil lives on their fertile homesteads, and condemned the vulgar glory of the conqueror! How far beyond his era was the writer who felt that the fairest page in his book was not that which told of battles and triumphs, but that which portrayed a peaceful reign, when swords were turned into ploughshares! The world has not yet learned that the highest function of government is to promote individual prosperity. The vulgar, wicked notion of 'glory' bewitches the nations still. A Europe, armed to the teeth and staggering under the weight of its weapons, has need to go to school to this old Hebrew ideal. 'They didn't know everything down in Judee,' but they knew that peace has nobler victories than war has. The people who see nothing in the world's history but natural evolution have a hard nut to crack in accounting for the singular fact that the Jew somehow or other had got hold of a truth to which the most advanced nations to-day have scarcely grown up.

II. The wealth of Solomon is illustrated by his large equipment of chariots and horsemen. The older habits of the nation had not favoured the use of either, and their employment by Solomon was a sign of growing luxury, which had the seeds of evil in it. But the novelty was characteristic of the change coming over Israel in his day, and of its closer intercourse with other nations. The number of forty thousand for the stalls of the horses is an evident clerical error, which is

corrected in the parallel passage in 2 Chronicles ix. 25 to the more probable number of four thousand. A well-organised staff looked after provisioning the cavalry and chariot horses wherever they were quartered. This one instance of Solomon's resources should be connected with the other details of these. The intention of all is, not only to magnify his wealth, but to bring out the fulfilment of the promise made to him as part of the reward of his prayer for wisdom, that he should have the inferior good which he had not asked, 'both riches and honour.'

The principle which the writer of this book would confirm and exemplify is, that to the man who seeks first the kingdom of God and His righteousness all these things shall be added. Now the whole order of supernatural providences in the Old Testament was directed to making material prosperity depend on obedience to God. And we cannot assert that the New Testament order has the same purpose in view. 'Prosperity was the blessing of the Old Testament; adversity is the blessing of the New.' But even in Old Testament times outward prosperity did not always follow godliness, and the problem which has tortured all generations had already been raised, as the Book of Job and Psalm lxxiii. show.

Undoubtedly, religion does contribute to prosperity. The natural tendency of the course of life which Christianity enjoins is to lead to moderate, modest success in a worldly point of view. Not many millionaires owe their millions to the practice of Christian virtues, but many a man owes his elevation from poverty to modest competence to the character and habits which his religion has stamped on him. People who get converted in the slums soon get out of the slums.

But, whether Christianity helps a man to worldly success or not, it helps him to get all the good out of the world that the world can give. It may, or may not, give dainties, but it will make brown bread sweet. It may, or may not, give wealth, but it will make the 'little that a righteous man hath better than the riches of many wicked.' They who know no higher good than earth can yield know not the highest good of earth; they who put worldly prosperity and treasure second find them far more precious and sweet than when they ranked them as first.

III. But the crown of Solomon's gifts was his wisdom. And his elevation of intellectual and moral endowments above material good is as remarkable as his similar elevation of peace above warlike fame, and suggests the same questions as to the source of ideas so far ahead of what was then the world's point of view. Observe that Solomon's 'wisdom' in all its departments is traced to God its giver. Observe, too, that expression 'largeness of heart,' by which is meant, not width of quick sympathy or generosity, but what we should call comprehensive intellect. The 'heart' is the centre of the personal being, from which thoughts as well as affections flow, and the phrase here points to thoughts rather than to affections.

Solomon, then, was a many-sided student, and his 'genius' showed itself in very various forms. He lived before the days of specialists. The region of knowledge was so limited that a man could be master in many departments. Nowadays the mass has become so unmanageable that, to know one subject thoroughly, we have to be ignorant of many, like the scholar who had given his life to the study of the Greek noun, and, dying, lamented that he had not confined himself to the dative

case! Practical wisdom, which had its field in doing justice between his subjects; shrewd observation of life, with wit to discern resemblances and to put wisdom into homely, short sayings; poetic sensibility and the gift of melodious speech; and, added to these manifold endowments, interest in, and rudimentary knowledge of, natural history and botany, make the points specified as Solomon's wisdom.

‘A man so various that he seemed to be
Not one, but all mankind's epitome,’—

the first and greatest of the few students or philosophers who have sat on thrones.

But the main thing to notice is that in Solomon we see exemplified the normal relation between religion and intellectual power and learning. Judge, artist, scientist, and all other thinkers and students, draw their power from God, and should use it for Him. And, on the other hand, Solomon's example is a rebuke to those narrow-minded Christians who look askance at men of learning, letters, or science, as well as to those still more narrow-minded men of intellectual ability who think that science and religion must be sworn foes. If our religion is what it should be, it will widen our understanding all round.

‘Let knowledge grow from more to more,
But more of reverence in us dwell.’

GREAT PREPARATIONS FOR A GREAT WORK

‘And Hiram king of Tyre sent his servants unto Solomon; for he had heard that they had anointed him king in the room of his father: for Hiram was ever a lover of David. 2. And Solomon sent to Hiram, saying, 3. Thou knowest how that David my father could not build an house unto the name of the Lord his God for the wars which were about him on every side, until the Lord put them under the soles of his feet. 4. But now the Lord my God hath given me rest on

every side, so that there is neither adversary nor evil occurrent. 5. And, behold, I purpose to build an house unto the name of the Lord my God, as the Lord spake unto David my father, saying, Thy son, whom I will set upon thy throne in thy room, he shall build an house unto My name. 6. Now therefore command thou that they hew me cedar trees out of Lebanon; and my servants shall be with thy servants: and unto thee will I give hire for thy servants according to all that thou shalt appoint: for thou knowest that there is not among us any that can skill to hew timber like unto the Sidonians. 7. And it came to pass, when Hiram heard the words of Solomon, that he rejoiced greatly, and said, Blessed be the Lord this day, which hath given unto David a wise son over this great people. 8. And Hiram sent to Solomon, saying, I have considered the things which thou sentest to me for: and I will do all thy desire concerning timber of cedar, and concerning timber of fir. 9. My servants shall bring them down from Lebanon unto the sea: and I will convey them by sea in floats unto the place that thou shalt appoint me, and will cause them to be discharged there, and thou shalt receive them: and thou shalt accomplish my desire, in giving food for my household. 10. So Hiram gave Solomon cedar trees, and fir trees, according to all his desire. 11. And Solomon gave Hiram twenty thousand measures of wheat, for food to his household, and twenty measures of pure oil: thus gave Solomon to Hiram year by year. 12. And the Lord gave Solomon wisdom, as He promised him: and there was peace between Hiram and Solomon; and they two made a league together.—1 KINGS v. 1-12.

THE building of the Temple was begun in the fourth year of Solomon's reign (1 Kings vi. 1). The preparations for so great a work must have taken much time, so that the arrangement with Hiram recorded in this passage was probably made very early in the reign. That probability is strengthened if we suppose, as we must do, that the embassy from Hiram mentioned in verse 1 was sent to congratulate Solomon on his accession. If so, the latter's proposal to get timber and stones from the Lebanon would be made at the very commencement of the reign. Three years would not be more than enough to get the material ready and transported. Great designs need long preparation. Raw haste wastes time; deliberation is as needful before beginning as rapid action is when we have begun.

I. Verses 3-5 set forth very forcibly the motives which impelled the young king to the work, and may suggest to us the motives which should urge us to diligence in building a better temple than he reared. He begins by reference to his father's foiled wish, and

to the reason why David could not build the house. Not only was it inappropriate that a warlike king should build it, but it was impossible that, whilst his thoughts were occupied and his resources taxed by war, he should devote himself to such a work. In Assyria and Egypt the great warrior kings are the great temple-builders, but a divine decorum forbade it to be so in Israel.

Solomon next thankfully describes his own happier circumstances. Observe his designation of Jehovah in verse 4 as 'my God,' and compare with verse 3, where He is called David's God. The son had inherited the divine protection and the father's sense of personal relation to Jehovah. That is a better legacy than a throne. Well had it been for Solomon if he had held by the faith of his first days of royalty! Such a sense of a personal bond of love protecting on the one hand, and love trusting and obeying on the other, is the spring of all true service of God, whether it is busied in temple-building or in anything else.

We note also the grateful recognition of benefits received, and the tracing of peace and outward prosperity to God's care. There was not a cloud in the sky. The horizon was clear all round, and it was 'the Lord my God,' who had made this ease for Solomon. We are often more ready to recognise God's hand in sorrows than in joys. When He smites, we try to say 'It is the Lord!' Do we try to say it when all things are smooth and bright?

The effect of blessings should be thankfulness, and the proof of thankfulness is service. So Solomon did not take prosperity as an inducement to selfish luxurious repose, but heard in it God's call to a great task. If all the rich men and all the leisurely women

who call themselves Christians would do likewise, there would be plenty of workers and of resources for Christ's service, which now sorely lacks both. How many of such 'lay up treasure for themselves, and are not rich toward God'! How many fritter away their leisure in vanities, having time for any amusement or folly, but none for Christian service!

The man whom Jesus called 'Thou fool!' not the wise king, is the pattern for a sad number of professing Christians. 'Thou hast much goods laid up for many years.' What then? 'I purpose to build an house for the name of the Lord'? By no means. 'I will build greater barns, and that will give me something to do, and then I will take mine ease.'

We note, too, that Solomon was impelled to his great work by the knowledge that God had appointed him to do it. The divine word concerning himself, spoken to his father, sounded in his ears, and gave him no rest till he had set about obeying it (v. 5). The motives of the great temple-builders of old, as they themselves expound them in hieroglyphics and cuneiform, were largely ostentation and the wish to outdo predecessors; but Solomon was moved by thankfulness and by obedience to his father's will, and still more, to God's destination of him. If we would look at our positions and blessings as he looked at his in the fair dawning of his reign, we should find abundant indications of God's will regarding our work.

Solomon uses a remarkable expression as to the purpose of the Temple. It is to be 'an house for the name of the Lord.' That is not the same as 'for the Lord.' Pagan temples might be intended by their builders for the actual residence of the god, but Solomon knew that the heaven of heavens could not

contain Him, much less this house which he was about to build. We are fairly entitled, then, to lay stress on that phrase, 'the Name.' It means the whole self-revelation of God, or, rather, the character of God as made known by that self-revelation.

The Temple was, then, to be the place in which the God who fills earth and heaven was to manifest Himself, and where His servants were to behold and reverence Him as manifested. The Shechinah was the symbol, and in one aspect was a part, of that self-revelation. However, in common speech the Temple was spoken of as the house of Jehovah. The same thought which is expressed in Solomon's fuller phrase underlay the expression,—*He dwelt* 'not in temples made with hands,' but His *name* was set there, and the structure was reared, not so much for Him as that worshippers might there meet Him.

II. The rest of the passage deals with Solomon's request to Hiram, and the preparation of the material for the Temple. Solomon's first care was to secure timber and stone. His own dominions can never have been well wooded, and there are many indications that the great central knot of mountainous land, which included the greater part of his kingdom, was comparatively treeless. He therefore proposed to Hiram to supply timber from the great woods on Lebanon, which have now nearly died out, and offered liberal payment.

The parallel account in 2 Chronicles makes Solomon offer specified quantities of provisions for Hiram's workmen, and makes Hiram accept the terms. Verse 11 of this chapter says that the provisions named there were for the Tyrian king's 'household.' This may possibly mean the workmen, who would be regarded as Hiram's slaves, but, more probably, 'household'

means 'court,' and Solomon had not only to feed the army of workmen, but to supply as much again for the great establishment which Hiram kept up. The little slip of seacoast, with the mountain rising sharply behind, which made Hiram's kingdom, could not grow enough for his people's wants. His country was 'nourished' by Palestine, long centuries after this time (Acts xii. 20), and the same was the case in Solomon's period. In verse 11, the quantity of oil is impossibly small as compared with that of wheat. 2 Chronicles reads 'twenty thousand' instead of 'twenty,' and the Septuagint inserts 'thousand' in verse 11, which is probably correct.

With all his Oriental politeness and probably real wish to oblige a powerful neighbour, Hiram was too true a Phœnician not to drive a good bargain. He was king of 'a nation of shopkeepers,' and was quite worthy of the position. 'Nothing for nothing' seems to have been his motto, even with friends. He would love Solomon, and send him flowery congratulations, and talk as if all he had was his ally's, but when it came to settling terms he knew what his cedars were worth, and meant to have their value.

There are a good many people who get mixed up with religious work, and talk as if it were very near their hearts, who have as sharp an eye to their own advantage as he had. The man who serves God because he gets paid for it, does not serve Him. The Temple may be built of the timber and stones that he has supplied, but he sold them, and did not give them, therefore he has no part in the building.

How different the uncalculating lavishness of Solomon! He knows no better use for treasures than to expend them on God's service, and 'all for love, and

nothing for reward.' That is the true temper for Christian work. He to whom Christ has given Himself should give himself to Christ; and he who has given himself should and will keep back nothing, nor seek for cheap ways of serving the Lord. He who gives all, be it two mites, or a fishing-boat and some torn nets, or great wealth like that which Solomon found in his father's treasuries and devoted to building the Temple, gives much; and he who gives less than he can gives little.

Solomon's work was, after all, outward work, and fitter for that early age than the imitation of it would be now. The days for building temples and cathedrals are past. The universal religion hallows not Gerizim nor Jerusalem, but every place where souls seek God. The spiritual religion asks for no shrines reared by men's hands; for Jesus Christ is the true Temple, where God's name is set, and where men may behold the manifested Jehovah, and meet with Him. But we have work to do for Christ, and a temple to build in our own souls, and a stone or two to lay in the great Temple which is being built up through the ages. Well for us if we use our resources and our leisure, for such ends with the same promptitude, thankful surrender, and sense of fulfilling God's purpose, as animated the young king of Israel!

BUILDING IN SILENCE

'... There was neither hammer nor axe nor any tool of iron heard in the house, while it was in building.'—1 KINGS VI. 7.

THE Temple was built in silence. It 'rose like an exhalation.'

'No hammer fell, no ponderous axes rung,
Like some tall palm the mystic fabric sprung.'

Perhaps it was merely for convenience of transport and to save time that the stones were dressed in the quarries, but more probably the silence was due to an instinct of reverence. We may fairly use it as suggesting two thoughts.

I. How God's house is mostly built in silence. 'The Kingdom of God cometh not with observation.'

(1) In reference to its advance in the world. Destructive work is noisy, constructive work is silent. God was in 'the still small voice,' not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire. Christ's own career, how silent it was! Drums are loud and empty. The spread of the kingdom was unnoticed by the world's great ones—Cæsars, philosophers, patricians, and it silently grew underground. Hence may flow—

(a) An encouragement to those whose work is inconspicuous.

(b) A lesson not to mistake noise and notoriety for spiritual progress.

(c) Guidance as to our expectations of the advance of Christ's kingdom. It will transform society by slow, often unnoticed, degrees, by radical change of individuals' habits. The elevation of humanity will be slow, like the imperceptible rise of the Norwegian coast. Sudden changes are short-lived changes. 'Lightly come, lightly go.' What matures slowly will last long.

(2) In reference to its growth in our souls.

Silence is needed for that. There must be much still communion and quiet reflection. The advance in the Christian life is variously likened to a battle, since there are antagonists and struggle is needed to overcome; and to vegetable or corporeal growth, which the mysterious indwelling life works without effort

and almost without consciousness, but it is also likened to the erection of a building, in which there is continuity, and each successive course of masonry is the foundation for that above it. That work of building is work that must be done in silence. If we are to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus, we must silently drink in the sunshine and dew, and so prosperously pass from blade to ear, and thence to full corn in the ear.

Surely nothing is more needed in these days of noisy advertisement, and measurement of the importance of things by the noise that they can make, than this lesson of the place of silence in Christian progress, both for individuals and for the Christian Church as a whole.

II. How God's house is built of prepared stones.

That is true, in one view of the matter, in regard to the Church on earth, for there must be the individual act of repentance and faith before a soul is fit to be built into the fabric of the Church.

There is providential training of men for their tasks before these are given to them.

But the highest application of the symbol which we venture to find in our text is to the relation between the earthly and the heavenly life.

This world is the quarry where the stones are dressed for the Temple in the heavens.

(a) Life is the chipping and hewing. The unnecessary pieces are struck off with heavy mallet and sharp chisel. Pain and sorrow are thus explained, if not wholly, yet sufficiently to bring about submission and trust.

(b) The Builder has His plan clearly before Him, and works accurately to realise it. He perfectly knows what He means to build, and every stroke of the dressing-tool is accurately directed. There are no mistakes made in His quarrying.

(c) We may be sure that the prepared stones will be brought to the Temple site and built into it. There lie gigantic half-hewn pillars in abandoned quarries in Syria and Egypt. But no one will ever say of the divine Temple-Builder: He began to build and was not able to finish. It remains a problem how the old builders managed to transport these huge stones from the quarries to the site, but we may be sure that the Architect of the 'house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens,' knows how to bring every stone that has been prepared here, to the place prepared for it, and for which it has been prepared. We may repose on the Apostle's assurance that 'He that has begun a good work in you will perform it,' or rather on the more sure word of Jesus Himself, 'He that overcometh, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God.'

THE KING 'BLESSING' HIS PEOPLE

And it was so, that when Solomon had made an end of praying all this prayer and supplication unto the Lord, he arose from before the altar of the Lord, from kneeling on his knees with his hands spread up to heaven. 55. And he stood, and blessed all the congregation of Israel with a loud voice, saying, 56. Blessed be the Lord, that hath given rest unto His people Israel, according to all that He promised: there hath not failed one word of all His good promise, which He promised by the hand of Moses His servant. 57. The Lord our God be with us, as He was with our fathers: let Him not leave us, nor forsake us: 58. That He may incline our hearts unto Him, to walk in all His ways, and to keep His commandments, and His statutes, and His judgments, which He commanded our fathers. 59. And let these my words, wherewith I have made supplication before the Lord, be nigh unto the Lord our God day and night, that He maintain the cause of His servant, and the cause of His people Israel at all times, as the matter shall require: 60. That all the people of the earth may know that the Lord is God, and that there is none else. 61. Let your heart therefore be perfect with the Lord our God, to walk in His statutes, and to keep His commandments, as at this day. 62. And the king, and all Israel with him, offered sacrifice before the Lord. 63. And Solomon offered a sacrifice of peace-offerings, which he offered unto the Lord, two and twenty thousand oxen, and an hundred and twenty thousand sheep. So the king and all the children of Israel dedicated the house of the Lord.—1 KINGS viii. 54-63.

THE great ceremonial of dedicating the Temple was threefold. The first stage was setting the ark in its

place, which was the essence of the whole thing. God's presence was the true dedication, and that was manifested by the bright cloud that filled the sanctuary as soon as the ark was placed there. The second stage was the lofty and spiritual prayer, saturated with the language and tone of Deuteronomy, and breathing the purest conceptions of the character and nature of God, and all aglow with trust in Him. Then followed, thirdly, this 'Blessing of the Congregation.' The prayer had been uttered by the kneeling king. Now he stands up, and, with ringing tones that reach to the outskirts of the crowd, he gathers the spirit of his prayer into two petitions, preceded by praise for national blessings, and followed by exhortation to national obedience. A huge sacrifice of unexampled magnitude closes the whole.

I. Note the thankful retrospect of the nation's past (verse 56). Solomon 'blessed the congregation' when, in their name, he lifted up his voice to bless the Lord, prayed that God would incline their hearts to keep His law, and would maintain their cause, and exhorted them to keep their hearts perfect with Him. We bless each other when we ask God to bless, and when we draw each other nearer Him. Standing there in the new Temple, with a united nation gathered before him, the cloud filling the house, and peace resting on all his land to its farthest border, the king looks back on the long road from Sinai and the desert, and sums up the whole history in one sentence. The end has vindicated the methods. There had been many a dark time when enemies had oppressed, and many a hard-fought field had been stained with Israel's blood; but all had tended to this calm hour, when Israel's multitudes were gathered in worship, and their unguarded homes were safe. There had been many heroes in the long line

'Time would fail' him 'to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah; of David and Samuel . . . who . . . turned to flight armies of aliens.' One name alone is worthy to be named,—the name of the true Deliverer and Monarch. It is the Lord who 'hath given rest unto His people.' We look on the past most wisely when we see in it all the working of one mighty Hand, and pass beyond the great names of history or the dear names which have made the light of our homes, to the ever-living God, who works through changing instruments; and 'the help that is done on earth, He doeth it Himself.' We read the past most truly when we see in all its vicissitudes God's unchanging faithfulness, and recognise that the foes and sorrows which often pressed sore upon us were no breach of His faithful promises, but either His loving chastisement for our faithlessness, or His loving discipline meant to perfect our characters. We read the past best from the vantage-ground of the Temple. From its height we understand the lie of the land. Communion with God explains much which is else inexplicable. Solomon's judgment of Israel's checkered history will be our judgment of our own when we stand in the higher courts of the heavenly home, and look from that height upon all the way by which the Lord our God hath led us. In the meantime, it is often a trial for faith to repeat these words; but the blessing that comes from believing them true is worth the effort to stifle our tears in order to say them.

II. Note the prayer for obedient hearts (verses 57, 58). The proper subject-matter of this petition is 'that He may incline our hearts to walk in His ways,' and God's presence is invoked as a means thereto. The deepest desire of a truly religious soul is for the felt nearness

of God. That goes before all other blessings, and contains them all. Nothing is so needful or so sweet as that. The presence of God is the absence of evil, the evil both of pain and of sin, as surely as the rising sun is the routing of night's black hosts. 'The best of all is, God is with us.' The prayer again looks back to the past, and asks that the ancient experiences may be renewed. The generations of those who trust in God are knit together, and the wonders of old time are capable of repetition to-day. Faith can say with deeper meaning than the Preacher, 'That which hath been is that which shall be.' However varying may be the forms, the fact of a divine presence and help according to need is invariable, and they that have gone before have not exhausted the fountain, which will fill the vessel of the latest comer as it did that of the first. How beautifully the abiding God and the fleeting series of 'our fathers' is contrasted! A moment of triumph, when some work, like that of building the Temple, which has for ages been looked forward to, and into which the sacrifices and aspirations of a long line of dead toilers are built, brings strongly before all thoughtful men the continuity of a nation or a Church, and the transiency of its individual members. It should suggest the abiding God yet more strongly than it does the passing fathers. The mercy remains the same, while the receivers change. The sunshine and the tree are the same, though the leaves which glisten and grow in the light have but one summer to live.

But Solomon desires that God may be with him and his people for one specific purpose. Is it to bring outward prosperity, or to extend their territory, or to give them victory? As in his choice in his dream, so now, he asks, not for these things, but for an inward influence

on heart and will. What he wants most for himself and them is moral conformity to God's will. All must be right if that be right. The prayer implies that, without God's help, the heart will wander from the paths of duty. The weakness of human nature, and the consequent necessity for God's grace in order to obedience, were as deeply felt by the devout men of the Old Testament as by Apostles. They are felt by every man who has honestly tried to measure the sweep and inwardness of God's law, and to realise it in life. We need go but a very short way on the road to discover that temptations to diverge lie so thick on either side, and that our feet grow weary so soon, that we shall make but little progress without help from above.

The synonyms for the law are worthy of notice. Why are there so many of these in the Old Testament? For the same reason that there are so many for 'money' in English,—because those who made the language thought so much about the thing, and delighted in it so much. As 'commandments,' it was solemnly imposed by rightful authority, and obedience was obligatory. The word rendered 'statutes' means something engraved, or written, and recalls the tables inscribed by God's finger. 'Judgments' are the divine decisions or sentences as to what is right, and therefore the infallible clue to the else bewildering labyrinth. To obey these commandments, to read that solemn writing, and to accept these decisions as our guides, is man's perfection and blessedness; and for that God's felt presence is indispensable.

III. Note the prayer for God's defence (verses 59, 60). The proper subject-matter of this petition is that God would maintain the cause of king and nation; and it is preceded by a petition that, to that end, the preceding

prayer may be answered, and is followed by the desire that thereby the knowledge of God may fill the earth. The prayer for outward blessings comes after the prayer for inward heart-obedience. Is not that the right order? Our prayers need to be prayed for, and a true desire is not contented with one utterance. To ask that what we have asked may be given is no vain repetition, nor a sign of weak faith, or undue anxiety. How bold the figure in asking that the prayer may lie before God day and night, like some suppliant at the foot of His throne!

Note the grand aim of God's help of Israel,—the universal diffusion of His name among all the peoples of the earth. Solomon understood the divine vocation of Israel, and had risen above desiring blessings only for his own or his subjects' sake. Later ages fell from that elevation of feeling, and hugged their special privileges without a thought of the obligations which they involved. God's choice of Israel was not meant for the exclusion of the Gentiles, but as the means of transmitting the knowledge of God to them. The one nation was chosen that God's grace might fructify through it to all. The fire was gathered into a hearth, that the whole house might be warmed. But selfishness marred the divine plan, and Israel became a non-conductor, and the privileges selfishly kept became corrupt; as the miser's corn stored in his barns in famine breeds weevils. Christians need no more solemn lesson of what comes from selfishly hoarding spiritual blessings than the fate of Israel. God hath shined into our hearts, that we may give to others who sit in the dark the light which we possess; and if we fail to do so, the light will darken within us.

IV. The blessing ends with one brief, all-comprehen-

sive charge to the people, which seems based, by its 'therefore,' on the preceding thought of Jehovah as the only God. The only attitude corresponding to His sole and supreme Majesty is the entire devotion of heart, which leads to thoroughgoing obedience to His commandments. The word rendered 'perfect' literally means 'entire' or 'sound,' and here expresses the complete devotion of the whole nature. Solomon meant that it should be complete, in contradistinction to any sidelong glances to idolatry. The principle underlying that 'therefore' is that, God being what He is, our only God and refuge, the only adequate hope and object of our nature, we should give our whole selves to Him. We, too, are tempted to bring Him divided hearts, and to carry some of our love and trust as offerings at other shrines. But if there be 'one God, and none other but He,' then to serve Him with all our heart and strength and mind is the dictate of common sense, and the only service which He can accept, or which can bring to our else distracted natures peace and satisfaction. His voice to us is, 'My son, give Me thy whole heart.' Our answer to Him should ever be that prayer, 'Lord, . . . unite my heart to fear Thy name.' A divided heart is misery. Partial trust is distrust. 'Love me all in all, or not at all,' is the requirement of all deep, human love; and shall God ask less than men and women ask from and give to one another?

'THE MATTER OF A DAY IN ITS DAY'

'At all times, as the matter shall require.'—1 KINGS VIII. 50.

I HAVE ventured to diverge from my usual custom, and take this fragment of a text because, in the forcible

language of the original, it carries some very important lessons. The margin of our Bible gives the literal reading of the Hebrew; the sense, but not the vigorous idiom, of which is conveyed in the paraphrase in our version. 'At all times, as the matter shall require,' is, literally, 'the thing of a day in its day'; and that is the only limitation which this prayer of Solomon places upon the petition that God would maintain the cause of His servants and of His people Israel. The kingly suppliant got a glimpse of very great, though very familiar, truths, and at that hour of spiritual illumination, the very high-water mark of his relations to God—for I suppose he was never half as good a man afterwards—he gave utterance to the great thought that God's mercies come to us day by day, according to the exigencies of the moment.

Now, I think that in the words 'the matter of a day in its day' we may see both a principle in reference to God's gifts and a precept in reference to our actions. Let us look at these two things.

I. A principle in reference to God's gifts.

Of course, obviously—and I need not say more than a word about that—we find it so in regard to the outward blessings that are poured into our lives. We are taught, if the translation of the New Testament is correct, to ask, 'Give us this day our daily bread,' and to let to-morrow alone. Life comes to us pulsation by pulsation, breath by breath, by reason of the continual operation, in the material world, of the present God's present giving. He does not start us, at the beginning of our days, with a fund of physical vitality upon which we thereafter draw, but moment by moment He opens His hand, and lets life and breath and all things flow out to us moment by moment, for no creature

would live for an instant except for the present working of a present God. If we only realised how the slow pulsation of the minutes is due to the touch of His finger on the pendulum, and how everything that we have, and the existence of us who have it, are results of the continuous welling out from the fountain of life, of ripple after ripple of the waters, everything would be more sacred, and more solemn, and fuller of God than, alas! it is.

But the true region in which we may best find illustrations of this principle in reference to God's gifts is the region of the spiritual and moral bestowments which He in His love pours upon us. He does not flood us with them: He filters them drop by drop, for great and good reasons. I only mention three various forms of this one great thought.

God gives us gifts adapted to the moment. 'The matter of a day,' the thing fitted for the instant, comes. In deepest reality, all is one gift, for in truth what God gives to us is Himself; or, if you like to put it so, His grace. That little word 'grace' is like a small window that opens out on to a great landscape, for it gathers up into one encyclopædial expression the whole infinite variety of beneficences and bestowments which come showering down upon us. That one gift is, as the Apostle puts it in one of his eloquent epithets, 'the manifold grace of God,' which word in the original is even more rich and picturesque, because it means the 'many-variegated' grace—like some rich piece of embroidery glowing with all manner of dyes and gold. So the one gift comes to us manifold, rich in its adaptation to, and its exquisite fitness for, the needs of the moment. The Rabbis had a tradition that the manna in the wilderness tasted to every man just what

each man needed or wished most. It is as though in some imperial city on a day of rejoicing, one found a fountain in the market-place pouring out, according to the wish of the people, various costly wines and refreshing drinks. God's gift comes to us with like variety—the 'matter of a day in its day.'

God never gives us the wrong medicine. In whatever variety of circumstances we stand, that one infinitely simple and yet infinitely complex gift contains what we specially want at the moment. Am I struggling? He extends a hand to steady me. Am I fighting? He is my 'sword and shield, my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower.' Am I anxious? He comes into my heart, and brings with Him a great peace, and all waves cease to toss and smooth themselves into a level plain. Am I glad? He comes to heighten the gladness by some touch of holier joy. Am I perplexed in mind? If I look to Him, 'His coming shall be as the morning,' and illumination will be granted. Am I treading a lonely path? There is One by my side who will neither change, nor fail, nor die. Whatever any man needs, at the moment that he needs it, that one great Gift will supply 'the matter of a day in its day.'

God gives punctually. Many of us may have sometimes sent Christmas presents to India or Australia some weeks before. Some will arrive in time and some will be too late. God's gifts never reach us before the day, and they never come after the day. 'The Lord shall help her, and that right early,' said the grand psalm. What the Psalmist was thinking about was, I suppose, that miraculous intervention when the army of Sennacherib was smitten in a night. Timid and faithless souls in Jerusalem, as they looked

over the walls and saw the encircling lines of the fierce foes drawing closer and closer round the doomed city, must have said, 'Our Lord delayeth His coming,' and could not stand the test of their faith and patience, involved in God's apparent indifference to the need of His people. To-morrow the assault is to be delivered. To-night

'The Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast,
And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed';

and the would-be assailants, when that to-morrow dawned, were lying stiff and stark in their tents. God's help comes, not too soon, lest we should not know the blessedness of trusting in the dark; and not too late, lest we should know the misery of trusting in vain.

Peter is lying in prison. Herod intends, after the Passover, to bring him out to the people. The scaffolding is ready. The first watch of the night passes, and the second. If once it is fairly light, escape is impossible. But in the grey dawn the angel touches the sleeper. He wakes while his guards sleep. There is no need for hurry. He who has God for his Deliverer has no occasion to 'go out with haste.' So, with strange and majestic leisureliness, the escaping prisoner is bid to put on his shoes and gird himself. No doubt, he cast many a scrutinising glance at the four sleeping legionaries whom a heedless movement might have wakened. When all is ready, he is led forth through all the wards, each being a separate peril, and all made safe to him. The first gate opens, and the second gate opens, and the iron gate that leads into the city opens, and quietly he and the angel go down the street. It is light enough for him to see his way to the house where the brethren are assembled. He gets safe behind Mary's door before it is light enough for

the gaolers to discover his absence, and for the pursuers to be started in their search. The Lord did help him, and that right early—‘the matter of a day in its day.’

We shall find, if we leave our times in His hand, that the old simple faith has still a talismanic power to quiet us. His time is best, so be patient, and be trustful in your patience.

Again, God gives gifts enough, and not more than enough. He serves out our rations for spirit as for body, as they do on shipboard, where the sailors have to take their pots and plates to the galley every day and for each meal, and get enough to help them over the moment's hunger. The manna fell morning by morning. ‘He that gathered much had nothing over, he that gathered little had no lack.’ So all the variety of our changeful conditions, besides its purpose of disciplining ourselves and of making character, has also the purpose of affording a theatre for the display, if I may use such cold language—or rather let me say affording an opportunity for the bestowment—of the infinitely varied, exquisitely adapted, punctual, and sufficient grace of God.

II. But now, secondly, a word about the text as containing a precept for our action.

Let me put what I have to say in three plain sentences.

First, take short views of the future. Of course, we have to look ahead, and in reference to many things to take prudent forecasts, but how many of us there are who weaken ourselves and spoil to-day by being ‘over-exquisite to cast the fashion of uncertain evils’! It is a great piece of practical philosophy, and I am sure that it has much to do with our getting the best out of the present moment, that we should either take very short or very long views of the future. Either

' Let the unknown to-morrow
Bring with it what it may,'

or look beyond the last of the days into the unseen light of an unsetting sun. If I must anticipate, let me anticipate the ultimate, the changeless, the certain; and let me not condemn my faculty of picturing that which is to come, to look along the low ranges of earthly life, and torture myself by imagining all the possibilities of evil of which my condition admits, as being turned into certainties to-morrow. Take 'the matter of a day in its day.' 'Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.' Let us make the minute what it ought to be, then God will make the whole what it ought to be.

Again I say, let us fill each day with discharged duties. If you and I do not do the matter of the day in its day, the chances are that no to-morrow will afford an opportunity of doing it. So there will come upon us all, if we are unfaithful to this portioning out of tasks to times, that burden of an irrevocable past, and of the omitted duties that will stand reproving and condemning before us, whensoever we turn our eyes to them. 'It might have been, and it is not'; does a sadder speech than that fall from human lips? Brethren, the day, though it is short, is elastic; and no one knows how much of discharged service and accomplished work and fulfilled responsibilities can be crammed into its hours, until he has earnestly tried to fill each moment with the task which belongs to the moment. 'The sluggard will not plough by reason of the cold; therefore shall he beg in harvest and have nothing.' If our day is not filled full of work, some to-morrow will be filled full, in retrospect, of thorns and stings. Life is short; 'the night cometh when no

man can work.' 'I must work the works of Him that sent me while it is day.'

Lastly, I would say, keep open a continual communion with God, that day by day you may get what day by day you need. There are hosts of people who call themselves, and, in some kind of surface way, are, Christian people, who seem to think that they get all that they need of the grace of God in a lump, at the beginning of their Christian career, and who are living upon past communications and the memory of these, and are forgetting that they can no more live and be nourished upon past gifts of God's grace than upon the dinner that they ate this day last year. We must hang continually upon Him, if we are continually to receive from His hand. No past blessing will avail for present use.

Dear friends, the purpose of this principle, which I have been trying to illustrate in God's way of dealing with us, is that we shall be content to be continually dependent, and consciously as well as continually dependent, upon Him. In the measure in which we keep our hearts open for the perpetual influx of His grace, in that measure shall we be ready for each day as it comes; for its trials and its joys, for its possibilities and its duties.

This, too, must be remembered—that the days bolted together make months; and the months, years; and the years, life; and that life as a whole is 'a day'; and that there is a 'matter' of that day which can only be done in its day. Oh that none of us may be the subjects of that sad wail from a Saviour's heart and a Saviour's lips, which lamented, 'If thou hadst known, at least, in this thy day, the things that belong to thy peace; but now'—the night has come, and the darkness of the night, and—'they are hid from thine eyes!'

PROMISES AND THREATENINGS

'And it came to pass, when Solomon had finished the building of the house of the Lord, and the king's house, and all Solomon's desire which he was pleased to do, 2. That the Lord appeared to Solomon the second time, as He had appeared unto him at Gibeon. 3. And the Lord said unto him, I have heard thy prayer and thy supplication, that thou hast made before Me: I have hallowed this house, which thou hast built, to put My name there for ever; and Mine eyes and Mine heart shall be there perpetually. 4. And if thou wilt walk before Me, as David thy father walked, in integrity of heart, and in uprightness, to do according to all that I have commanded thee, and wilt keep My statutes and My judgments: 5. Then I will establish the throne of thy kingdom upon Israel for ever, as I promised to David thy father, saying, There shall not fail thee a man upon the throne of Israel. 6. But if ye shall at all turn from following Me, ye or your children, and will not keep My commandments and My statutes which I have set before you, but go and serve other gods, and worship them: 7. Then will I cut off Israel out of the land which I have given them; and this house which I have hallowed for My name, will I cast out of My sight; and Israel shall be a proverb and a byword among all people: 8. And at this house, which is high, every one that passeth by it shall be astonished, and shall hiss; and they shall say, Why hath the Lord done thus unto this land, and to this house? 9. And they shall answer, Because they forsook the Lord their God, who brought forth their fathers out of the land of Egypt, and have taken hold upon other gods, and have worshipped them, and served them: therefore hath the Lord brought upon them all this evil.'—1 KINGS ix. 1-9.

THE successful end of a great work is often the beginning of a great reaction. When the tension is slackened, the whole nature of the worker is relaxed, and the temptation to slothful self-indulgence is strong. God knows our frame, and mercifully times His manifestations to the moments of special need. So, when Solomon had finished his great task, 'the Lord appeared the second time, as He had appeared at Gibeon.' There had been no manifest token of approval during all the years of building the Temple, for none was needed; but now there was danger that the finished work might be followed by languor and indifference, and therefore once more God spoke words of stimulus, both promises and warnings.

A solemn alternative is set before the king, both parts of which are fitted to rouse his energy and inspire him to faithful obedience. The same alternatives

are presented to each of us. In verses 3-5 God promises blessed results from clinging to Him and keeping His statutes; in verses 6-9 He mercifully threatens the tragic issues of departure. In applying these to ourselves we must remember that outward prosperity was attached to a devout life more closely in Israel than it is now. But, though the form of the blessings dependent on doing God's will alters, the reality remains unaltered.

I. The promises to Solomon are preceded by the assurance that his prayer had been heard. The answer corresponds very beautifully to the petitions. God has 'put His name' in the Temple, as the descent of the Glory to rest between the cherubim visibly showed, and thus has fulfilled Solomon's petition; but the answer surpasses the prayer in that the presence of 'the Name' is promised 'for ever.' Similarly, in Psalm cxxxii., the answer to the petition 'Arise into Thy rest' transcends the petition which it answers, and adds the same promise of perpetuity, 'This is My rest *for ever.*' Again, Solomon had prayed, 'that Thine eyes may be open towards this house,' and God answers with the expanded promise that not His eyes only, but His heart shall be there perpetually. He is 'able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think,' and He delights to surprise us with over-answers to our prayers. We cannot widen our desires so far but that His gifts will stretch beyond them on every side.

But the promise of perpetual dwelling in the Temple is conditional, as appears in the latter part of God's answer, though no condition is stated at first. The promises to Solomon individually are all contingent. The all-important 'if' at the beginning of verse 4

governs the whole. The divine eulogium on David, which introduces these promises, suggests how mercifully God regards the imperfect lives of His servants. That merciful interpretation of conduct is removed by a whole universe from palliation of sin. It affords no ground for our thinking little of our inconsistencies. David's crime was sternly rebuked and sorely punished, but still his life, in its main drift and outline, could be presented as a pattern, as being marked by integrity of heart and uprightness. The moon shines like a disc of silver, though its surface is pitted with extinct volcanoes.

We may note, too, the pregnant description in outline of the elements of a devout life, as here enjoined on Solomon. The first requisite is to walk before God; that is, to nourish a continual consciousness of His presence, and to regulate all actions and thoughts under the thrilling and purifying sense of being 'ever in the great Taskmaster's eye.' Only we are not to think of Him as only a Taskmaster, but as a loving Friend and Helper. A child is happy in its little work or play when it knows that its father is looking on with sympathy. The sense of God's eye being on us should 'make a sunshine in a shady place,' should lighten labour and sweeten care. It is at the root of practical obedience, as its place in this sequence shows; for there follow it, in verse 4, 'integrity of heart and uprightness,' on which again follow obedience to all God's commandments.

First must come the clear recognition of God's relation to us. That recognition will influence our relation to Him, bending hearts to love and wills to submit, and the whole inward being to cleave to Him. Thence, and only thence, will issue in the life the streams of practical obedience. It is vain to seek to produce

righteous deeds unless our hearts are right, and it is as vain to labour at making our hearts right unless thoughts of what God is to us have purified them. Morality is rooted in religion. On the other hand, no knowledge of the truth about God is worth anything unless it touches the hidden man of the heart, and then passes outward to mould conduct. 'Faith without works is dead.' Correct theology and glowing emotions lack their consummation if they do not impel to holy and God-pleasing living.

The reward promised in verse 5 is for Solomon alone. His throne is to be 'established for ever.' The duration intended by that expression is therefore not absolutely unlimited, but equivalent to 'during thy lifetime.' Solomon could only affect himself by his obedience. The continuance of the kingdom after him depended on his successors. His possession of the throne during his life was the beginning of the fulfilment of the promise to David referred to in verse 5, but it was only the beginning, and, like all God's promises, it was contingent on obedience. We receive no outward kingdom if we are servants of God; but, in deepest truth, the righteous man is a king, 'lord of himself, though not of lands.' All creatures serve the soul that serves God, and all Christ's brethren share in His royalty.

II. The second part of this divine utterance is addressed to the whole nation, as is marked by the 'ye' there compared with the 'thou' in verse 4, and it lays down for succeeding generations the conditions on which the new Temple, that stood glittering in the bright Eastern sunshine, should retain its pristine beauty. While the address to Solomon incited to obedience by painting its blessed consequences, that to

the nation reaches the same end by the opposite path of darkly portraying the ruin that would be caused by departure from God. God draws by holding out a hand full of good things, and He no less lovingly drives by stretching out a hand armed with lightnings.

A plain declaration of the evils that dog disobedience is as loving as a bright vision of the good that attends on submission. The sternest threatenings of Scripture are spoken that they may never need to be executed. There is no more foolish misconception of Christianity than that which calls it harsh because it reveals that 'the wages of sin is death.' Note that the threatenings come second, not first. God's heart is averse to smite. To lavish blessing is His delight, and judgment is 'His work, His strange work,' forced on Him by sin.

The special sin against which Israel was warned was that to which it was specially prone and tempted by its circumstances. When all the nations 'worshipped stocks and stones,' it was hard to 'keep thy faith so pure' as to have no share in the universal bewitchment. So the whole history of the people is one of lapses into idolatry and of chastisements leading to temporary amendment, until the long, sharp lesson of the Captivity eradicated the disposition to be as the nations around. No doubt, idolatry in its crudest forms is outgrown now in Western lands, but sense still craves material embodiment of the unseen, and still feels the pressure of the material and palpable. Hence the earthward direction of so many lives. Asthmatical patients often breathe more easily in the slums of a city than in pure mountain air, and sense-bound men find difficulty in respiration on the heights of a religion which minimises the appeal to sense.

The penalty attached to departure from God was the

loss of the land. Israel kept it on a tenure like that of some of our English nobility, who hold their estates on condition of doing some service to the sovereign. Of course, that connection between serving God and national prosperity involved continual supernatural intervention, and cannot be applied entirely to national prosperity now; but it still remains true that moral and religious corruption saps the foundations of a people's well-being, and, when carried far enough, destroys a people's existence. The solemn threat of becoming 'a proverb and a byword' among all peoples is quoted, apparently from Deuteronomy xxviii. 37, and has been only too terribly fulfilled for weary centuries.

The promise in verse 3, that God's eyes and heart should be perpetually on the Temple, has now the condition attached that Israel should cleave to the Lord. Otherwise it will be cast out of His sight, and be a mark for scorn and wonder. The vivid representation of a dialogue between passers-by is quoted from Deuteronomy xxix. 24-26, where it is spoken in reference to the nation. It carries the solemn thought that God's name is made known among the heathen by the punishment of His unfaithful people, not less really, and sometimes more strikingly, than by the blessings bestowed on the obedient. If we will not magnify Him by joyous service, by rewarding which, with good He can magnify Himself, He will magnify Himself on us by retribution, the more severe as our blessings have been the greater. The lightning-scathed tree, standing white in the forest, witnesses to the power of the flash, as its leafy sisters in their green beauty proclaim the energy of the sunshine. Israel has, perhaps, been a more convincing witness for God, in its homeless centuries, than ever it was when at rest in the good land. 'If God

spared not the natural branches, take heed lest He also spare not thee.'

A ROYAL SEEKER AFTER WISDOM

'And when the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the Lord, she came to prove him with hard questions. 2. And she came to Jerusalem with a very great train, with camels that bare spices, and very much gold, and precious stones: and when she was come to Solomon, she communed with him of all that was in her heart. 3. And Solomon told her all her questions: there was not any thing hid from the king, which he told her not. 4. And when the queen of Sheba had seen all Solomon's wisdom, and the house that he had built, 5. And the meat of his table, and the sitting of his servants, and the attendance of his ministers, and their apparel, and his cupbearers, and his ascent by which he went up unto the house of the Lord; there was no more spirit in her. 6. And she said to the king, It was a true report that I heard in mine own land of thy acts and of thy wisdom. 7. Howbeit I believed not the words, until I came, and mine eye had seen it: and, behold, the half was not told me: thy wisdom and prosperity exceedeth the fame which I heard. 8. Happy are thy men, happy are these thy servants, which stand continually before thee, and that hear thy wisdom. 9. Blessed be the Lord thy God, which delighteth in thee, to set thee on the throne of Israel: because the Lord loved Israel for ever, therefore made He thee king, to do judgment and justice. 10. And she gave the king an hundred and twenty talents of gold, and of spices very great store, and precious stones: there came no more such abundance of spices as these which the queen of Sheba gave to king Solomon. 11. And the navy also of Hiram, that brought gold from Ophir, brought in from Ophir great plenty of almag trees, and precious stones. 12. And the king made of the almag trees pillars for the house of the Lord, and for the king's house, harps also and psalteries for singers; there came no such almag trees, nor were seen unto this day. 13. And king Solomon gave unto the queen of Sheba all her desire, whatsoever she asked, besides that which Solomon gave her of his royal bounty. So she turned and went to her own country, she and her servants.'—1 KINGS x. 1-13.

WE feel the breath of a new era in the accounts of Solomon's reign. One most striking peculiarity is the friendly intercourse with the nations around. The horizon has widened, and, instead of wars with Philistines and Ammon, we have alliances with Egypt, Tyre, and, in the present passage, with Sheba, a district of Southern Arabia. The expansion was fruitful of both good and evil. It brought new ideas and much wealth; but it brought, too, luxury and idolatry. Still Israel was meant to be 'a light to lighten the Gentiles,' and in this picturesque story of the wisdom-seeking queen, we have the true relation of Israel to the nations in its

purest form. The details of the narrative, interesting as they are, need not occupy us long.

The queen had heard 'the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the Lord,' by which seems to be meant his reputation of being gifted with deep knowledge of the divine character as revealed to him. The questions which occupy earnest souls in all lands and ages were stirring in the heart of this woman-chief. The only way, in these old days, to learn the wisdom of the wise, was to go to them. So the streets of Jerusalem saw the strange sight of the long train which had come toiling up from Arabia, laden with its characteristic produce, gold and spices and precious stones, in the enumeration of which is reflected the wonder of the beholders at the unaccustomed procession. But better than all her wealth was the eager woman's thirst for truth. Surely it is a very unworthy and unlikely explanation of her 'hard questions' and purpose to suppose that she came only for a duel of wit,—to pose Solomon with half-playful riddles. The journey was too toilsome, the gifts too large, the accent of conviction in her subsequent words too grave, for that. She was a seeker after truth, and probably after God, and ✓ had known the torture of the eternal questions which rise in the mind, and, once having risen, leave no rest till they are answered.

So she came, though half incredulous, hoping to find some solution to what 'was in her heart,' and as thirsty for the answer as her country's sands for water. Only they who have known the pain of carrying such questions, like a fire in their bones, can know the joy which she felt when she found one to whom she could speak them. It is something of a drop to pass from Solomon's wisdom to the list of the splendours of his household,

and the effect which these produced on the queen; but the whole account of Solomon's reign is marked by the same naïve blending of wisdom and material wealth. In those days, outward prosperity was the sign of divine favour. But even in those days they knew that wisdom was 'better than rubies.' The two elements were both at their height in Solomon's reign, and the lower of them finally got uppermost, and wrecked him. Plain living and high thinking are better than 'wisdom,' which lets itself down to make much of 'the meat of the table,' and a retinue of servants in fine clothes. How many of us would listen much more respectfully to wisdom, if it lived in a palace, than in 'dens and caves of the earth'?

The queen's words in verses 6 to 9 are graceful with a woman's tact, and full of feeling. She confesses that she had come half-doubting, even though she risked the journey, and fervently avows how far fame had been unlike itself in this instance, and had diminished, ^x and not magnified. Then she envies the servants who wait on him, because they are so near the fountain, and finally breaks into praise of Solomon's God, whose love to Israel was shown in giving it such a king. One does not know whether praise of God or compliments to Solomon were most in her mind. The words scarcely sound as if she had become a worshipper of God. He is to her but 'thy God.' But we may believe that she carried away some seed which grew up. Then, with munificent interchange of gifts, she and her train glide out of the story, and we lose them in the dark. The account of the wealth brought by Hiram's ships comes singularly in, breaking the narrative of the queen. Its insertion seems to indicate some connection between the fleet and her, and to suggest that Sheba and Ophir were near each other (which would put Ethiopia, where

some have located it, out of court), and that she heard of Solomon through it.

The whole incident may be regarded as an illustration of the spirit that should mark all seekers after truth, whether earthly or heavenly. This queen had to win a victory over national prejudices, over the disabilities of her sex, over the temptations of her station, to travel far, and face dangers, and to incur great cost. It was surely no mere playful errand on which she was bent. She was smitten with the sacred impulse to 'follow knowledge like a sinking star.' Seldom, indeed, have rulers made progresses from their dominions for such an end, and seldom have two of them met to confer on such subjects. We shall not rightly measure the relative importance of things unless we resolutely set ourselves to look at them with eyes purged from the illusions of sense, and cleared to see how much better than wealth and all outward good is the possession of truth. All sacrifices made to win it are richly repaid, and wise investments. Even in regard to lower kinds of truth, to win them is worth the effort of a life; and, in regard to the highest kind, which is the personal Truth, he is the wise man who counts all earthly good but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of it. This queen points the path by which all pilgrims of the truth must travel. It is not to be won without effort, without conquest of prejudices, repression of weakness, sacrifices of delights, and long effort. There must be humility, which will gladly learn, if there is ever to be its possession.

'Nor can the man that moulds in idle cell
Unto her happy mansion attain.'

But in our days, the easier the attainment, the less the appreciation. The queen of Sheba had no

books, and she travelled far to get wisdom. We are flooded with all appliances, and many of us would not cross the road to get Solomon's wisdom, but would do much to be invited to feast at his table, or to secure some of the queen's camels' load.

This story brings out the true ideal of Israel's relation to the nations. Solomon is the embodiment of his people. His reign is marked by largely increased and amicable relations with his neighbours. These were not all wholesome, and ultimately led to much mischief. But, while the purely commercial connection with Tyre was defective, in that there was no attempt to bring Hiram and the men who worked for the Temple to any knowledge of the God of the Temple, and the relation with Egypt was more unsatisfactory still, in that it meant only the importation of corrupting luxuries and the marriage with an Egyptian princess, an idolatress, this relation with the queen of Sheba was the true one. Solomon did in it what Israel was meant to do for the world. He attracted a seeker from afar, and imparted to her the wisdom that God had given him. He answered the torturing questions and won the confidence of this woman who was groping in the dark, till he led her by the hand to the light. A bond of friendship knit them together, and mutual gifts cemented their amity.

All this is but the putting into concrete form of God's purpose in choosing Israel for His own. It was not meant to retain or to enclose, but to diffuse, the light. The world can only get blessing by one man or people getting it first. As well charge the builder of the light-house with partiality because he puts the bright lamps in that narrow room, as find fault with the divine method of making the earth know His name. The

lighthouse is reared that the beams may stream out over the tossing, nightly sea. So God appointed to His people of old their task. So He has appointed the same task to His Church to-day. We ought to attract seekers from afar, to win their frank speech when they come, to be able to answer their anxious questions, and to bind them to ourselves in grateful bonds. In these days there are multitudes harassed by the modern forms of the same old, ever-pressing riddles which burdened this ancient queen's heart; and that Church but ill discharges its office which repels rather than draws the seekers, or has no word of illumination for them if they come.

But the highest use to be made of the story is that which Christ made of it. It stands as a perpetual witness against those who are too blind to see the beauty, or too careless to be drawn to listen to the wisdom, of a present Christ. The sacrifices which men can make for lower objects are the most powerful rebukes of their unwillingness to make sacrifices for the highest, just as their capacity of love and trust is of their not loving and trusting Him. The same energy and effort which this queen put forth to reach Solomon, and which men eagerly put forth for some temporal good, would suffice to bring them to the feet of the great Teacher. Her longing for wisdom, her discernment of the person who could give it, and her toilsome journey, rebuke men's indifference to Christ's gifts, their failure to recognise His sweetness and power to make blessed, and their laziness and self-indulgence, which will not take a hundredth part of the pains to secure heaven which they cheerfully expend, and that often in vain, to secure earth. Will the 'Queen of the south' stand alone as witness in that day, or will there not be many

out of other lands, who, like her, stretched out their hands to the dimly descried but yearned-for light, and came nearer to it, though they seemed far off, than many who lived in its full blaze and never cared for it? Will it be only Christ's contemporaries who will be condemned by heathen seekers after God, or will there be many of ourselves, convicted of stolid indifference to the Christ who has been beside us all our lives, and has prayed us 'with much entreaty' and in vain, to 'receive the gift'?

They who find their way to Him, and tell Him all that is in their hearts, will have all their questions solved. We have not far to go; for 'a greater than Solomon is here.' If we betake ourselves to Him, and learn of Him, we too shall find that 'the half was not told us'; for Christ possessed is sweeter than all expectation, however high-pitched it may be, and to win Him is the only gain in which there is no disappointment, either at first or at last. We may all have the blessedness of His servants, 'which stand continually before' Him, and not only 'hear,' but receive into their spirits His 'wisdom.'

THE FALL OF SOLOMON

'For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods: and his heart was not perfect with the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father. 5. For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Zidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. 6. And Solomon did evil in the sight of the Lord, and went not fully after the Lord, as did David his father. 7. Then did Solomon build an high place for Chemosh, the abomination of Moab, in the hill that is before Jerusalem, and for Molech, the abomination of the children of Ammon. 8. And likewise did he for all his strange wives, which burnt incense and sacrificed unto their gods. 9. And the Lord was angry with Solomon, because his heart was turned from the Lord God of Israel, which had appeared unto him twice, 10. And had commanded him concerning this thing, that he should not go after other gods: but he kept not that which the Lord commanded. 11. Wherefore the Lord said unto Solomon, Forasmuch as this is done of thee, and thou hast not kept My covenant and My statutes, which I have commanded thee, I will surely rend the kingdom from thee, and will give it to thy servant. 12. Notwithstanding in thy days I will not do

It for David thy father's sake: but I will rend it out of the hand of thy son. 12. Howbeit I will not rend away all the kingdom; but will give one tribe to thy son for David My servant's sake, and for Jerusalem's sake which I have chosen.'—1 KINGS xi. 4-13.

SCRIPTURE never blinks the defects of its heroes. Its portraits do not smooth out wrinkles, but, with absolute fidelity, give all faults. That pitiless truthfulness is no small proof of its inspiration. If these historical books were simply fragments of national records, owning no higher source than patriotism, they would never have blurted out the errors and sins of David and Solomon as they do. Where else are there national histories of which the very central idea is the laying bare of national sins and chastisements? or where else are there legends of the people's heroes which tell their sins without apology or reticence? The difference in tone augurs a different origin. The Old Testament histories are not written to tell Israel's glories, or even, we may say, to recount its history, but to tell God's dealings with Israel,—a very different theme, and one which finds its material equally in the glories and in the miseries, which respectively follow its obedience and disobedience. So Solomon's fall is told in the same frank way as his wisdom and wealth; for what is of importance is not Solomon so much as God's dealings with Solomon, when his heart was turned away. We are told that the narrative of Solomon's reign is an ideal picture. Strange idealising which leaves the ideal king wallowing in a sty of sensuality and an apostate from Jehovah!

Here we are simply told of the two things,—his sin, and the divine judgment which it drew after it.

I. Verses 4-8 tell the black story of Solomon's apostasy. What was its extent? Did he himself take part in idolatrous worship, or simply, with the foolish fond-

ness of an old sensualist, let these foreign women have their shrines? The darker supposition seems correct. The expression that he 'went after other gods' is commonly used to mean actual idolatry; and his wives could scarcely have been said to have 'turned away his heart,' if all that he did was to wink at, or even to facilitate, their worship. But, on the other hand, he does not seem to have abandoned Jehovah's worship. The charge against him is that 'his heart was not perfect,' or wholly devoted to the Lord, or, as verse 6 puts it, that he 'went not fully' after the Lord. His was a case of halting between two opinions, or rather, of trying to hold both at once. He wanted to be a worshipper of Jehovah and of these idols also.

Was his apostasy final? Yes, so far as we can gather from the narrative. Not only is there no statement of his repentance, but the silence with which he receives the divine announcement of retribution is suspicious; and the prophecy of Ahijah to Jeroboam, which obviously comes later in time than the threatenings of the text, treats the idolatry as still existing (verse 33). Further, we learn from 2 Kings xxiii. 13 that the shrines which he built stood till Josiah's time. If Solomon had ever abandoned his idolatry, he would not have left them standing. So we seem to have in him a case of a fall which knew no recovery, an eclipse which did not pass. The Book of Ecclesiastes, if of his composition, would somewhat lighten the darkness of such an end; but his authorship of it is now all but universally given up.

So there, on Olivet's southern ridge, right opposite the Temple, stood the three altars, and there the king worshipped; and, if he did, he would have a crowd of

imitators. The lessons of such a fall are many. First, it teaches the destructive effect of yielding to sensual indulgence. Solomon's unbridled and monstrous polygamy sapped his manhood and his principle, darkened his clear spirit, blinded his keen eye, and turned a youth of noble aspiration and a manhood of noble accomplishment into an old age without dignity, reverence, or calm. All his wisdom was worth little if it could not keep him master of himself. A young man who lets his passions run away with him is less to be condemned than an old sensualist. God means that reason should govern impulses and desires, and that conscience should govern all and be governed by His will. The vessel is sure to be wrecked when the officers are sent below and the mutineers get hold of the helm.

Second, it warns us that till the very end of life a fall is possible. This ship went down when the voyage was nearly over. In sight of port it struck, and that not for want of beacons. What pathetic warning lies in that phrase, 'when Solomon was old'! After so many years of high aims, so many temptations overcome, with such habits of wisdom and kingly nobility, after such prayers and visions, he fell; and, if *he* fell, who can be sure of standing? No length of life spent in holy thoughts and service secures us against the possibility of disastrous fall. Only one thing does,—'Hold Thou me up, and I shall be safe.' John Bunyan saw a door opening down to hell hard by the gates of the Celestial City. When a man that has been had in reputation for wisdom and honour shames the record of his life by a great splash of mud on the white page, near its end, he seldom returns. An old apostate is usually finally an apostate.

Third, may we not venture to see a warning here against marriages in which there is not unity in the deepest things, and a common faith? 'When you run in double harness, take a good look at the other horse.' If a young Christian man or woman enters on such a union with one who is not a Christian, it is a great deal more probable that, in the end, there will be two unbelievers than that there will be two Christians.

We have nothing to do with pronouncing on Solomon's final condition. But he stands on the page of this history, a sad, enigmatical figure, a warning to all young people to take heed that the attrition of the world does not rub off the bloom of early religion, or make them cynically ashamed of the unselfishness of their early desires. There is no sadder sight than an old man whose youthful enthusiasm for goodness and belief in the super-excellency of wisdom have withered, leaving him a hard worldling or a gross sensualist. Better the early days, when he was obscure and poor, and believed in wisdom and in the God of wisdom, than the late ones, when worldly success has spoiled him!

II. Verses 9-13 give the divine retribution announced. The immediate connection of sin and punishment is the teaching intended by this close juxtaposition of these two halves of our narrative. However long the chastisement may be in bursting, the divine resolve to send it is instantaneously consequent on the crime. The chain that binds departure from God with loss of blessing may be of many or few links, but it is riveted on when the evil is done. How gravely, as with the voice of an indictment drawn in heaven, the aggravations of Solomon's crime are set out, in that he had sinned against 'the Lord' who had appeared

to him twice (once in his youthful vision, and once after the completion of the Temple), 'and had commanded him concerning' the very sin that he had done. Sin is made more heinous by the abundance of God's favours and the plainness of His commands. If we would remember God's appearances to us and for us, and meditate on His revealed will, we should be more impregnable to the assaults of temptation.

We do not learn *how* the Lord said this to Solomon. Possibly it was by the same prophet who afterwards announced to Jeroboam his destiny; but, however announced, it seems to have been received in sullen silence, and to have wrought no softening nor change. Like all God's threatenings, it was spoken that it might not be inflicted. Solomon was threatened before the prophet spoke to Jeroboam; and if Solomon had repented, Jeroboam would never have been spoken to. But he is too far gone to be stopped, though he has God's own word for it that he is ruining his kingdom by his sin. We have as clear declarations of worse results from ours; but they do not stop some of us. How strange it is that men will put out their hands to grasp their sins, even though they have to stretch across the smoke of the pit for them!

Note how forbearance delays and diminishes retribution. The separation of the kingdom is deferred, and one tribe is left to the Davidic house; probably Judah is meant, and Benjamin is omitted as being small. Observe, too, how we have a double instance of the law of God's providence which visits the father's deeds on the children. The consequences of David's goodness fall on Solomon, and the consequences of Solomon's evil fall on Rehoboam. Stated in the language of the secular historian, that is to say that

the consequences of great national virtues or crimes are seldom reaped by the generation that sowed the seed and did the deed, but take time to mature and work themselves out. Stated in the language of Scripture, it is, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.' The separation of the kingdom was not brought about by miracle, but came in the natural course of things. A people ground down by heavy taxation and forced labour, to keep up the luxury of a court containing all that disgusting crowd of wives and concubines, was ripe for revolt, and when the sceptre fell into the hands of a headstrong fool, and there was a capable leader on the other side, discontent soon became rebellion, and rebellion soon became triumphant. It all flowed as naturally as possible from the same fountain as the idolatry of which it was the punishment; and so it teaches once more the great truth that 'the world's history is the world's judgment,' and that the so-called 'natural consequences' of our deeds are, even here and now, God's retribution for our deeds.

What a lesson as to God's great patience is here! What a solemn glimpse into man's power to counterwork God's purpose! So soon after its establishment did the house of David prove unworthy, and the experiment fail. Yet that long-suffering purpose is not turned aside, but persistently and patiently goes on its way, altering its methods, but keeping its end unaltered, bending even sin to minister to its design, pitying and warning the sinner ere it strikes the blow that the sinner has made needful.

Behind the figure of Solomon we see another. The wisest of men fell shamefully, captured by coarse lust, and apparently steeled against all remonstrances from

Heaven. 'A greater than Solomon is here.' The faults of the human kings of Israel prophesy of the true King, who is to be the substance of which they were but faint shadows, and whose manhood was stained by no flaw, nor His kingdom ever rent from His pure hands. Solomon was wise, but Christ is 'Wisdom.' Solomon built a Temple, but also altars to false gods overtopping it across the valley; and his Temple was burned with fire. But Christ is the true Temple as well as Priest and Sacrifice. Solomon was by name 'the peaceful,' and his land had outward rest, darkened at the last by war and rebellion. But Christ is the Prince of Peace, and of His dominion there shall be no end. Solomon is the great example of the sad truth that the loftiest and wisest share in the universal sinfulness. Christ is the one flawless Man, who makes those who take Him for their King wise and peaceful, prosperous, and in due time sinless, like Himself.

THE NEW GARMENT RENT

'And Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, an Ephrathite of Zereda, Solomon's servant, whose mother's name was Zeruah, a widow woman, even he lifted up his hand against the king. 27. And this was the cause that he lifted up his hand against the king: Solomon built Millo, and repaired the breaches of the city of David his father. 28. And the man Jeroboam was a mighty man of valour: and Solomon seeing the young man that he was industrious, he made him ruler over all the charge of the house of Joseph. 29. And it came to pass at that time when Jeroboam went out of Jerusalem, that the prophet Ahijah the Shilonite found him in the way; and he had clad himself with a new garment; and they two were alone in the field: 30. And Ahijah caught the new garment that was on him, and rent it in twelve pieces: 31. And he said to Jeroboam, Take thee ten pieces: for thus saith the Lord, the God of Israel, Behold, I will rend the kingdom out of the hand of Solomon, and will give ten tribes to thee: 32. (But he shall have one tribe for My servant David's sake, and for Jerusalem's sake, the city which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel:) 33. Because that they have forsaken Me, and have worshipped Ashtoreth the goddess of the Zidonians, Chemosh the god of the Moabites, and Milcom the god of the children of Ammon, and have not walked in My ways, to do that which is right in Mine eyes, and to keep My statutes and My judgments, as did David his father. 34. Howbeit I will not take the whole kingdom out of his hand: but I will make him prince all the days of his life for David My servant's sake, whom I chose because he kept My commandments and My statutes: 35. But I will take the kingdom out of his son's hand, and will give it unto thee, even ten tribes. 36. And unto his son

will I give one tribe, that David My servant may have a light alway before Me in Jerusalem, the city which I have chosen Me to put My name there. 37. And I will take thee, and thou shalt reign according to all that thy soul desireth, and shalt be king over Israel. 38. And it shall be, if thou wilt hearken unto all that I command thee, and wilt walk in My ways, and do that is right in My sight, to keep My statutes and My commandments, as David My servant did; that I will be with thee, and build thee a sure house, as I built for David, and will give Israel unto thee. 39. And I will for this afflict the seed of David, but not for ever. 40. Solomon sought therefore to kill Jeroboam. And Jeroboam arose, and fled into Egypt, unto Shishak king of Egypt, and was in Egypt until the death of Solomon. 41. And the rest of the acts of Solomon, and all that he did, and his wisdom, are they not written in the book of the acts of Solomon? 42. And the time that Solomon reigned in Jerusalem over all Israel was forty years. 43. And Solomon slept with his fathers, and was buried in the city of David his father: and Rehoboam his son reigned in his stead.—1 KINGS xi. 26-43.

SOLOMON falls into the background in the last part of the story of his reign, and his enemies are more prominent than himself. So long as he walked with God, he was of importance for the historian; but as soon as he forsook God, and was consequently forsaken of His wisdom, he becomes as insignificant as an empty vessel which has once held sweet perfume, or a piece of carbon through which the electric current has ceased to flow. The sunbeam has left that peak, and shines on other summits. Never was there a sadder eclipse.

We are here told first how the instrument for shattering Solomon's kingdom was shaped by himself. It is the old story of a young man of mark, attracting the eyes of the king, being promoted to offices of trust, which at once stir ambition, and give prominence and influence which seem to afford a possibility of gratifying it. The passion for building, so common in Eastern kings, and the cause of so much misery to their subjects, had grown on Solomon; and as his later days were harassed by war, and he had lost the safe defence of God's arm, Jerusalem had to be enclosed by a wall. His father had been able to leave a 'breach,' because the Lord was a wall round him and his city; and if Solomon had kept in his paths, he would have had no

need to add to the fortifications. The preservation of ancestral piety is for nations and individuals a surer protection than the improvement of ancestral outward defences. Jeroboam made himself conspicuous by his energy (for that rather than 'valour' must be the meaning of the word), and so got promotion. It was natural, but at the same time dangerous, to put him in command of the forced labour of his own tribe, as the narrative shows us was done; for 'the house of Joseph' is the tribe of Ephraim, to which, according to the correct translation of verse 26, he belonged. In such an office he would be thrown among his kinsmen, and would at once gain influence and learn to sympathise with their discontent, or, at any rate, to know where the sore places were, if he ever wanted to inflame them. One can easily fancy the grumblings of the Ephraimites dragged up to Jerusalem to the hated labour, which Samuel had predicted (1 Samuel viii. 16), and how facile it would be for the officer in charge to fan discontent or to win friends by judicious indulgence. How long this went on we do not know, but the fire had smouldered for some time under the unconscious king's very eyes, when it was fanned into a flame by Ahijah's breath.

That is the second stage in the story,—the spark on the tinder. We have heard nothing of prophets during Solomon's reign; but now this man from Shiloh, the ancient seat of the Tabernacle, meets the ambitious young officer in some solitary spot, with the message which answered to his secret thoughts and made his heart beat fast. The symbolic action preceding the spoken word, as usual, supplied the text, of which the word was the explanation and expansion. How pathetic is the newness of the garment! Unworn,

strong, and fresh, it yet is rent in pieces. So the kingdom is so recent, with such possibilities of duration, and yet it must be shattered! Thus quickly has the experiment broken down! It is little more than a century since Saul's anointing, little more than seventy years since the choice of David, and already the fabric, which had such fair promise of perpetuity, is ready to vanish away. If we may say so, that 'new garment' represents the divine disappointment and sorrow over the swift corruption of the kingdom. It was probably merely some loose square of cloth which Ahijah tore, with violence proportioned to its newness, into twelve pieces, ten of which he thrust into the astonished Jeroboam's hands. The commentary followed.

Ahijah's prophecy is substantially the same as the previous threatenings to Solomon, which had done no good. Their incipient fulfilment in the wars with Edom and Syria had been equally futile; and therefore God, who never strikes without warning, and never warns without striking if men do not heed, now drops the message into ears that were only too ready to hear. The seed fell on prepared soil, and Jeroboam's half-formed plans would be consolidated and fixed. The scene is like that in which the witches foretell to Macbeth his dignity. Slumbering ambitions are stirred, and a half-inclined will is finally determined by the glimpse into the future. How easily men are persuaded that God speaks, and how willing they are to obey, when their inclinations jump with Heaven's commandments! The prophet's message makes the separation of the kingdoms a direct divine act, and yet it was the breaking up of a divine institution. God's dealings have to be shaped according to facts, and He changes His methods, and lets the feebleness of His

creatures and their sins mould His august procedure. The divine Potter, like mere human artisans, has His spoiled pieces of work, and, with infinite resource and patience as infinite, re-shapes the clay into other forms. The separation of the kingdoms was a divine act, and yet it is treated often in the later books as a crime and rebellion. God works out His purposes through men's deeds, and their motives determine whether their acts are sins or obedience. A man may be a rebel while he is doing the will of God, if what he does be done at the bidding of his own selfishness. The separation of the kingdoms was God's doing, but it was brought about by the free action of men obeying most secular impulses of political discontent, and led by a cunning, self-seeking schemer.

Note that the prophecy is in three parts. First, verses 31-33 announce the punishment, with the reservation of a dwindled dominion to the Davidic house, for the sake of their great ancestor and of God's choice of Jerusalem, and solemnly charge on the people the idolatry which the king had introduced. The second part (verses 34-36) postpones the execution of the sentence till after Solomon's death, and assigns the same two reasons for this further forbearance. The third part (verses 37-39) promises Jeroboam the kingdom, and lays down the conditions on which the favours promised to David and his house may be his. The whole closes with the assurance that the affliction of the seed of David is not to be for ever.

The punishment was heavy; for the disruption of the kingdom meant the wreck of all the prosperity of Solomon's earlier days, the hopeless weakness of the divided tribes as against the formidable powers that pressed in on them from north and south, frequent

Intestine wars, bitter hatred instead of amity. Yet there was another side to it; for the very failure of the human kings made the Messianic hope the more bright, like a light glowing in the deepening darkness, and tumult and oppression might teach those whom prosperity and peace had only corrupted. The great lesson for us is the ruin which follows on departure from God. We do not see national sins followed with equal plainness or swiftness by national judgments; but the history of Israel is meant to show on a large scale what is always true, in the long run, both for nations and for individuals, that 'it is an evil thing and a bitter' to depart from the living God.

Mark, too, that the judgment is wrought out by perfectly natural causes. The separation follows old lines of cleavage. The strength of David's kingdom lay in the south; and Ephraim was too powerful a tribe and too proud of its ancient glories, to acquiesce cheerfully in the pre-eminence of Judah. The oppression of forced labour and heavy taxation was put forward as the reason for the revolt, and, no doubt, was the reason for the readiness with which the ten tribes rallied to Jeroboam's flag. There are two ways of writing history. You can either leave God out, or trace all to Him. The former way calls itself 'scientific' and 'positive.' The latter is the Bible way. Perhaps, if modern history were written on the same principles as the Books of Kings, the divine hand would be as plainly visible,—only it requires an inspired historian to do it. The way of bringing about the judgment for departing from God has changed, but the judgment remains the same to-day as when Ahijah rent his garment.

Between verses 39 and 40 we must suppose an attempt

at armed rebellion by Jeroboam. That is implied by the expression that he 'lifted his hand against the king' (verses 26, 27). That attempt must have been put down by Solomon. And that it should have been made shows how little Jeroboam was influenced by religious motives. The prophet's words had set him all afire with ambitious hopes, and he paid no heed to the distinct assurance that Solomon was to be 'prince all the days of his life.' He stretched out a rash, self-willed hand to snatch the promised crown, and broke God's commandment even while he pretended to be keeping it. How different David's conduct in like circumstances! He took no steps to bring about the fulfilment of Samuel's promise at his anointing, but patiently waited for God to do as He had said, in His own time, and meantime continued his lowly work. God's time is the best time; and he who greedily grasps at a premature fulfilment of promised good will have to pay for it by defeat and exile from the modest good that he had.

Jeroboam's flight to Egypt brings that ill-omened name on the page for the first time since the Exodus. It has given occasion to an extraordinary addition to the Septuagint, professing to tell his adventures there, —how he was high in Shishak's favour, and married a princess. That is apparently pure legend; but his residence there was important, as the beginning of Egypt's interference in Israel's affairs. It is an old trick of aggressive nations to side with a pretender to the throne of a country which they covet, and benevolently to strengthen him that he may weaken it. No doubt it was as Jeroboam's ally that Shishak invaded Judah in the fifth year of Rehoboam, and plundered the Temple and the palace. It was a bad

beginning for a king of Israel to be a pensioner of Egypt.

The narrative closes with the sad, reticent formula which ends each reign, and in Solomon's case hides so much that is tragic and dark. This was all that could be said about the end of a career that had begun so nobly. If more had been said, the record would have been sadder; and so the pitying narrative casts the veil of the stereotyped summary over the miserable story. There are many instances in history of lives of genius and enthusiasm, of high promise and partial accomplishment, marred and flung away, but none which present the great tragedy of wasted gifts, and blossoms never fruited, in a sharper, more striking form than the life of the wise king of Israel, who 'in his latter days' was 'a fool.' The goodliest vessel may be shipwrecked in sight of port. Solomon was not an old man, as we count age, when he died; for he reigned forty years, and was somewhere about twenty when he became king. But it was 'when he was old' that he fell, and that through passion which should have been well under control long before. The sun went down in a thick bank of clouds, which rose from undrained marshes in his soul, and stretched high up in the western horizon. His career, in its glory and its shame, preaches the great lesson which the Book of Ecclesiastes puts into his mouth as 'the conclusion of the whole matter': 'Fear God, and keep His commandments; for this is the whole duty of man.'

HOW TO SPLIT A KINGDOM

'And Rehoboam went to Shechem : for all Israel were come to Shechem to make him king. 2. And it came to pass, when Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who was yet in Egypt, heard of it (for he was fled from the presence of king Solomon, and Jeroboam dwelt in Egypt); 3. That they sent and called him. And Jeroboam and all the congregation of Israel came, and spake unto Rehoboam, saying, 4. Thy father made our yoke grievous : now therefore make thou the grievous service of thy father, and his heavy yoke which he put upon us, lighter, and we will serve thee. 5. And he said unto them, Depart yet for three days, then come again to me. And the people departed. 6. And king Rehoboam consulted with the old men, that stood before Solomon his father while he yet lived, and said, How do ye advise that I may answer this people? 7. And they spake unto him, saying, If thou wilt be a servant unto this people this day, and wilt serve them, and answer them, and speak good words to them, then they will be thy servants for ever. 8. But he forsook the counsel of the old men, which they had given him, and consulted with the young men that were grown up with him, and which stood before him : 9. And he said unto them, What counsel give ye that we may answer this people, who have spoken to me, saying, Make the yoke which thy father did put upon us lighter? 10. And the young men that were grown up with him spake unto him, saying, Thus shalt thou speak unto this people that spake unto thee, saying, Thy father made our yoke heavy, but make thou it lighter unto us; thus shalt thou say unto them, My little finger shall be thicker than my father's loins. 11. And now whereas my father did lade you with a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke : my father hath chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions. 12. So Jeroboam and all the people came to Rehoboam the third day, as the king had appointed, saying, Come to me again the third day. 13. And the king answered the people roughly, and forsook the old men's counsel that they gave him ; 14. And spake to them after the counsel of the young men, saying, My father made your yoke heavy, and I will add to your yoke : my father also chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions. 15. Wherefore the king hearkened not unto the people; for the cause was from the Lord, that He might perform His saying, which the Lord spake by Ahijah the Shilonite unto Jeroboam the son of Nebat. 16. So when all Israel saw that the king hearkened not unto them, the people answered the king, saying, What portion have we in David? neither have we inheritance in the son of Jesse : to your tents, O Israel : now see to thine own house, David. So Israel departed unto their tents. 17. But as for the children of Israel which dwelt in the cities of Judah, Rehoboam reigned over them.'—1 KINGS xii. 1-17.

THE separation of the kingdom of Solomon into two weak and hostile states is, in one aspect, a wretched story of folly and selfishness wrecking a nation, and, in another, a solemn instance of divine retribution working its designs by men's sins. The greater part of this account deals with it in the former aspect, and shows the despicable motives of the men in whose hands was the nation's fate; but one sentence (verse 15) draws back the curtain for a moment, and shows us the true

cause. There is something very striking in that one flash, which reveals the enthroned God, working through the ignoble strife which makes up the rest of the story. This double aspect of the disruption of the kingdom is the main truth about it which the narrative impresses on us.

As to the mere details of the incident, as a political revolution, they are in four stages. First come the terms of allegiance offered to the new king. Rehoboam goes to Shechem, because 'Israel was gone' there. The choice of the place is suspicious; for it was in the tribe of Ephraim, and had been for a time the centre of national life; and its selection at once indicated discontent with the preponderance of Jerusalem, and a wish to assert the importance of the central tribes. No doubt, the choice of the latter city for the capital had caused heart-burning, even during David's time.

Adopting the reading of the Revised Version, we see another suspicious sign in the recall of Jeroboam, and his selection as spokesman; for he had been in rebellion against Solomon (1 Kings xi. 26), and therefore an exile. Probably he had now been the instigator of the discontent of which he became the mouthpiece; and, in any case, his appearance as the leader was all but a declaration of war. His former occupation as superintendent of the forced labour exacted from his own tribe taught him where the shoe pinched, and the weight of the yoke would not be lessened in his representations.

No doubt, the luxury and splendour of Solomon's brilliant reign had an under side of oppression, even though forced labour was not exacted from Israelites (1 Kings ix. 22); but probably the severity was exaggerated in these complaints, which were plainly the

pretext for a revolt of which tribal jealousy was the main cause, and Jeroboam's ambition the spark that set light to the train. Certainly there was ignoring of the benefits of the peaceful reign, which had brought security and commerce. But there was enough truth in the complaint to make it plausible and effective for catching the people. Had they a right to suspend their allegiance on compliance with their terms?

Israel was neither a despotism, nor simply a constitutional monarchy. God appointed the kings, and had ordained the Davidic house to the throne; and therefore this making terms was, in effect, asserting independence of God's will. Jeroboam was scheming for a crown. The people were shaking off their submission to God. It is very doubtful if concession would have conciliated them. There is nothing elevated, not to say religious, in their motives or acts.

Then comes Rehoboam on the scene. The one sensible thing that he did was to take three days to think. Whether or no his little finger was thicker than his father's loins, his head was not half so wise. Ecclesiastes, speaking in Solomon's name, reckons it a great evil that he must leave his labour to his successor; 'and who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool?' Certainly Rehoboam had little 'wisdom' either of the higher or lower kind. It was the lower kind which the old counsellors of his father gave him,—that wisdom which is mere cunning directed to selfish ends, and careless of honour or truth. 'Flatter them to-day, speak them fair, promise what you do not mean to keep, and then, when you are firm in the saddle, let them feel bit and spur.' That was all these grey-headed men had learned. If that was what passed for 'wisdom' in Solomon's later days, we need not wonder at revolt.

To act on such motives is bad enough, but to put them into plain words, and offer them as the rule of a king's conduct, is a depth of cynical contempt for truth and kingly honour that indicates only too clearly how rotten the state of Israel was. Have we never seen candidates for Parliament and the like on one side of the water, and for Congress, Senate, or Presidency on the other, who have gone to school to the old men at Shechem? The prizes of politicians are often still won by this stale device. The young counsellors differ only in the means of gaining the object. Neither set has the least glimmer of the responsibility of the office, nor ever thinks that God has any say in choosing the king. Naked, undisguised selfishness animates both; only, as becomes their several ages, the one set recommends crawling and the other bluster. Think of Saul hiding among the stuff, David going back to his sheep after he was anointed, Solomon praying for wisdom to guide this people, and measure the depth of descent to this ignoble scramble for the sweets of royalty!

According to 1 Kings xiv. 21, Rehoboam was forty-one at this time, so his contemporaries could not have been very young. But possibly the number in the present text is an error for twenty-one, which would agree better with the tone of the reference to age here, and with the rash counsel. Note the recurrence, both in Rehoboam's question in verse 9 and in the young advisers' answer in verse 10, of the obnoxious speech of the people. That may be accidental, but it sounds as if both he and they were keeping their anger warm by repeating the offensive complaint.

The Revised Version reads, 'My little finger is thicker,' etc., and so makes the sentence not a threat, but the foundation of the following threat in an arrogant and

empty assertion of greater power. The fool always thinks himself wiser than the wise dead; the 'living dog' fancies that his yelp is louder than the roar of 'the dead lion.' What can be done with a Rehoboam who brags that he is better than Solomon?

The threat which follows is inconceivably foolish; and all the more so because it probably did not represent any definite intention, and certainly was backed by no force adequate to carry it out. Passion and offended dignity are the worst guides for conduct. Threats are always mistakes. A sieve of oats, not a whip, attracts a horse to the halter. If Rehoboam had wished to split the kingdom, he could have found no better wedge than this blustering promise of tyranny.

Next in this miserable story of imbecility and arrogance comes the answer to the assembly. Shechem had seen many an eventful hour, but never one heavier with important issues than that on which the united Israel met for the last time, and there, in the rich valley with Ebal and Gerizim towering above them, heard the fateful answer of this braggart. A dozen rash words brought about four hundred years of strife, weakness, and final destruction. And neither the foolish speaker nor any man in that crowd dreamed of the unnumbered evils to flow from that hour. Since issues are so far beyond our sight, how careful it becomes us to be of motives! Angry counsels are always blunders. No nation can prosper when moderate complaints are met by threats, and 'spirited conduct,' asserting dignity, is a sign of weakness, not of strength. For nations and individuals that is true.

Here the historian draws back the curtain. On earth stand the insolent king and the now mutinous people, each driving at their ends, and neither free of sin in

their selfishness. A stormy scene of passion, without thought of God, rages below, and above sits the Lord, working His great purpose by men's sin. That divine control does not in the least affect the freedom or the guilt of the actors. Rehoboam's disregard of the people's terms was 'a thing brought about of the Lord,' but it was Rehoboam's sin none the less. That which, looked at from the mere human side, is the sinful result of the free play of wrong motives, is, when regarded from the divine side, the determinate counsel of God. The greatest crime in the world's history was at the same time the accomplishment of God's most merciful purpose. Calvary is the highest example of the truth, which embraces all lesser instances of the wrath of man, which He makes to praise Him and effect His deep designs.

Again, the rending of the kingdom was the punishment of sin, especially Solomon's sin of idolatry, which was closely connected with the extravagant expenditure that occasioned the separation. So the so-called natural consequences of transgression constitute its temporal punishment in part, and behind all these our eyes should be clear-sighted enough to behold the operative will of God. This one piercing beam of light, cast on that scene of insolence and rebellion, lights up all history, and gives the principle on which it must be interpreted, if it is not to be misread.

Again, the punishment of sin, whether that of a community or of a single person, is sin. The separation was sin, on both sides; it led to much more. It was the consequence of previous departure. So ever the worst result of any sin is that it opens the door, like a thief who has crept in through a window, to a band of brethren.

Lastly, we have the fierce rejoinder to the empty boast of Rehoboam, and the definitive disruption of the nation. Jeroboam must have fanned the flame skilfully, or it would not have burst out so quickly. There is no hesitation, nor any regret. The ominous cry, which had been heard before, in Sheba's abortive revolt, answers Rehoboam with instantaneous and full-throated defiance. Rancorous tribal hatred is audible in it. Long pent up jealousy and dislike of the dynasty of David has got breath at last: 'To your tents, O Israel! now see to thine own house, David!'

That roar from a thousand voices meant a good deal more than the cowed king's vain threats did. The angry men who raised it, and were the tools of a crafty conspirator, the frightened courtiers and king who heard it, were alike in their entire oblivion of their true Lord and Monarch. 'God was not in all their thoughts.' An enterprise begun in disregard of Him is fated to failure. The only sure foundations of a nation are the fear of the Lord and obedience to His will. If politics have not a religious basis, the Lord will blow upon them, and they will be as stubble.

POLITICAL RELIGION

'Then Jeroboam built Shechem in mount Ephraim, and dwelt therein; and went out from thence, and built Penuel. 26. And Jeroboam said in his heart, Now shall the kingdom return to the house of David: 27. If this people go up to do sacrifice in the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, then shall the heart of this people turn again unto their lord, even unto Rehoboam king of Judah, and they shall kill me, and go again to Rehoboam king of Judah. 28. Whereupon the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold, and said unto them, It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem: behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. 29. And he set the one in Beth-el, and the other put he in Dan. 30. And this thing became a sin: for the people went to worship before the one, even unto Dan. 31. And he made an house of high places, and made priests of the lowest of the people, which were not of the sons of Levi. 32. And Jeroboam ordained a feast in the eighth month, on the fifteenth day of the month, like unto the feast that is in Judah; and he offered upon the altar. So did he

in Beth-el, sacrificing unto the calves that he had made: and he placed in Beth-el the priests of the high places which he had made. 33. So he offered upon the altar which he had made in Beth-el the fifteenth day of the eighth month, even in the month which he had devised of his own heart; and ordained a feast unto the children of Israel: and he offered upon the altar, and burnt incense.—1 KINGS xii. 25-33.

THE details of this section need no long elucidation; for the one fact which it records, namely, the establishment of the calf worship in Israel, is the main point to consider. As for details, we need touch them lightly. The 'building' of Shechem and Penuel is probably to be understood as 'fortifying'; for, in regard to the former town, we know from the preceding section that it *was* a town before the disruption, and the same is probably true of the latter. Two fortresses, one in the heart of his kingdom, one on the eastern border, where attack might be expected, were Jeroboam's first care.

In estimating his conduct, the fact must be remembered that Ahijah had promised him God's protection and the establishment of his kingdom in his family, on the sole condition of obedience. If he had believed the prophet, something else than building strongholds would have been his prime aim. But he evidently thought that promises were all very well, but thick walls were better. The two things recorded of him are quite of a piece; and the writer seems, by putting them thus side by side, to wish us to note their identity of motive and similarity in character.

The establishment of the calf worship was entirely due, according to this historian, to dread that religious unity would heal the schism of political duality, and that Jeroboam's kingdom and life would be sacrificed to the magnetism which would draw the revolted northern tribes back to render allegiance, where they went up to worship. The calculation was reasonable; but why, in estimating chances, did Jeroboam

leave out God's promise? That should have kept him at ease. The calves and the castles were signs of fear and of slight regard to the prophet's word. No doubt, when it suited him, he could vindicate rebellion on the plea of obeying God. The plea would have sounded more genuine if he had shown that he trusted God.

The calves were probably suggested by his Egyptian experiences, where he had seen sacred bulls worshipped living, and mummied dead. But the remembrance of Aaron and the golden calf was evidently present to him, as the almost verbal quotation of Aaron's words shows. If so, the whole transaction is still more accentuated as a revolt against the ritual of the central sanctuary. 'The much-calumniated Aaron is our example. He was mastered by his brother, but he was right, and we go back to the old original worship of our fathers.'

Jeroboam was among the first to employ the expedient, so often resorted to since, of white-washing old-world criminals, in order to provide an ancestry for modern heresies. The calves seem to have been doubled simply as a matter of convenience. When once the principle of saving trouble comes in, in religion, it generally plays a great part. If it were too much to go to Jerusalem, it would soon be too much to go to Bethel, and so Dan must be provided for the north. The calves were symbols of Jehovah, not of other gods, as must be carefully noted. The making of them implied all that followed; for a god must have shrine and priesthood and sacrifice and festivals. The Levites refusing to serve, and probably losing their inheritance, fled to Judah, and a new priesthood was made 'from among all the people' (Rev. Ver.). The Feast of Tabernacles was retained

but its date shifted forward a month, perhaps because the harvest, which it closed, was later in the north, but evidently with the design of, as it were, underscoring the religious separation.

The latter part of this passage should perhaps be attached more closely to the next chapter, and understood as describing the one instance of Jeroboam's sacrificing which was so grimly interrupted by the denunciation by the anonymous prophet from Judah. Such are the outlines of the facts. What are the lessons taught by them?

I. There is that one already mentioned,—the folly and sin of seeking to help God to fulfil His promises by our poor efforts at making their fulfilment sure to sense. No doubt many of His promises are contingent on our activity in material things; and no man has a right to expect that 'his bread shall be given him,' for instance, unless he contributes the 'sweat of his brow' towards it. But Jeroboam had had the conditions of safety and stability clearly laid down. They were, obedience after the pattern of David (1 Kings xi. 38). So there was no need for building Shechem and Penuel, nor for casting calves and serving them. The heavens will stand without our rearing brickwork pillars to hold them up. But it takes much faith to trust God's bare word, and we are all apt to feel safer if we have something for sense to grasp. On the open plain, God guards those who trust Him more securely than if they lay in cities 'fenced up to heaven.' 'Jerusalem shall be inhabited as towns without walls. . . . For I, saith the Lord, will be unto her a wall of fire round about.'

II. Another lesson taught here is the sin of degrading religion to be a mere instrument for securing personal

ends. Jeroboam has had many followers among politicians. The average 'statesman' looks on all religions as equally true or untrue, and is ready to be polite to any of them, if he can carry his measures thereby. The long history of the relations of Church and State in the Old World has been little else than the State's hiring and muzzling the Church for its own advantage, and the protests of a faithful few against the degradation of State patronage and consequent control.

In England, Jeroboam and his calves used to be the favourite shocking example of the sin of schism, with which High Church orators were fond of pelting Non-conformists. The true lesson from him and them is precisely the opposite one; namely, the weakening of religion, when it is favoured and endowed by the civil power. The priests of Bethel, who were the creatures of Jeroboam, were not likely to be his or his successors' rebukers. When Amos the prophet spoke bold words against a king, it was Amaziah the priest who gave the shameful counsel, 'O thou seer, flee into the land of Judah, and prophesy there; but prophesy no more at Bethel: for it is the king's sanctuary.' Is there no such thing known as a flaming profession of religion, because it is respectable, or opens the way to some good position? Does nobody pose in public, especially about election times, as a liberal supporter of Churches and a devout Church-member, with an eye mainly to votes? Do political parties think it a good thing to get the religious people to go for their ticket? Or, to take less base instances, is there not a whole school who estimate Christianity mainly as valuable as a social force, and, without any deep personal recognition of its loftier aspects, think it well that it should be generally accepted, especially by other

people, as it makes them easier to govern, and cements the social fabric?

Christianity is something more than social cement. Jeroboam's policy was a great success, as policy. It both united his kingdom and definitively separated it from Judah. But it was a success purchased at the price of degrading religion into the lackey of a court. Samson went to sleep on Delilah's lap, and she cut off the clustering locks in which his strength lay.

III. The true nature of idolatry is brought out in the incident. Jeroboam did not draw Israel away to worship other gods. No charge of that sort is ever made against the calf worship. The images were meant, just as Aaron's, of which they were a reproduction, was meant, to be symbols of Jehovah. The true object of worship was worshipped in a false way. No matter though the image represented Him, its worship was idol worship. There is no ground in the narrative for the surmise of Stanley,—who in this, as usual, simply says ditto to Ewald,—that Jeroboam's motive was the desire to prevent Israel's adopting false gods, and that the calves were a compromise by which he hoped to stem the tide of apostasy to Baal worship. The single motive stated in the text is policy inspired by fear. Jeroboam did not care enough about the worship of Jehovah to mould his statecraft with the view of conserving it. If he had so cared, he could not have set up the calves. His doing so is uniformly regarded in Scripture as idolatry pure and simple; and though it is clearly distinguished from the worship of false gods, it is none the less branded as rebellion against Jehovah.

A visible representation of Jehovah was as much an

idol as a similar one of Baal would have been. It necessarily degraded the conception of Him. It brought sense into dangerous prominence as an aid to worship. The symbol might at first, and to the more devout, be a mere symbol, and transparent; but it would soon become opaque, and from symbol turn embodiment, and thence pass to being the very deity represented. It is a feat of abstraction impossible for the ordinary man, to worship before an idol, and not to worship the idol. The strange, awful fascination which idolatry exercised is perhaps gone now from the civilised world. But the lesson remains ever in season, that it is dangerous work to bring in sense as an ally of devotion, because outward things, which at first may be only symbols and helps, are almost certain to become something more.

IV. Jeroboam may stand, finally, as a type of the men who suppose themselves to be worshipping God when they are only following their own wills. All his ceremonial had this damning characteristic, that it was 'devised of his own heart'; and so it was himself that was enshrined in his new house of the high places, and himself to whom the sacrifices were offered. Absolute obedience to God's will, whatever perils may seem to attend it, is true worship. Wherever apparent devotion to Him is mingled with burning incense to our own net, the mixture ruins the devotion. 'Obedience is better than sacrifice.' Temptations to take our own way will often appear as the dictates of sound policy, and to neglect them as culpable carelessness. But such paltering with plain commandments is as ruinous as sinful, and is not to be atoned for by outward worship.

What did Jeroboam win by his intrusion of self-will

into the region which ought to be sacred to perfect obedience? A troubled reign and the destruction of his house after one generation. One more thing he won; namely, that terrible epithet, which becomes almost a part of his name, 'Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin.' What a title to be branded on a man's forehead for ever! It is always a mistake to disobey God. Every sin is a blunder as well as a crime. This only is the safe motto for churches and individuals, in all the details of worship and of life: 'Lo, I come to do Thy will, O Lord, and Thy law is within my heart.'

THE RECORD OF TWO KINGS

'In the thirty and first year of Asa king of Judah began Omri to reign over Israel, twelve years: six years reigned he in Tirzah. 24. And he bought the hill Samaria of Shemer for two talents of silver, and built on the hill, and called the name of the city which he built, after the name of Shemer, owner of the hill, Samaria. 25. But Omri wrought evil in the eyes of the Lord, and did worse than all that were before him. 26. For he walked in all the way of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, and in his sin wherewith he made Israel to sin, to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger with their vanities. 27. Now the rest of the acts of Omri which he did, and his might that he shewed, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Israel! 28. So Omri slept with his fathers, and was buried in Samaria: and Ahab his son reigned in his stead. 29. And in the thirty and eighth year of Asa king of Judah began Ahab the son of Omri to reign over Israel: and Ahab the son of Omri reigned over Israel in Samaria twenty and two years. 30. And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord above all that were before him. 31. And it came to pass, as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he took to wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Zidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshipped him. 32. And he reared up an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he had built in Samaria. 33. And Ahab made a grove; and Ahab did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him.'—1 KINGS xvi. 23-33.

JEROBOAM'S son and successor was killed by Baasha, Baasha's son and successor was killed by Zimri, who reigned for a week, and then burned the palace and died in the flames. A struggle for the throne followed between Omri, the commander-in-chief, and Tibni

'Tibni died, and Omri reigned.' So, in fifty years, the kingdom that was to relieve Israel from oppression staggered through seas of blood, and four kings, or would-be kings, died by violence.

Omri's dynasty lasted about as long, namely, through the reigns of four kings, and was then swept away like the others, in blood and fire. The text gives a meagre outline of the reigns of himself and his son Ahab, of which perhaps the meagreness is the most significant feature. The only fact told of the father is that he built Samaria, and his whole reign is summed up in the damning sentence that he 'walked in the way of Jeroboam.' We learn from the Moabite stone that he waged successful war against that country, and that it was tributary to Israel for forty years. In Micah vi. 16, mention is made of the statutes of Omri, as if he had given edicts for idolatry. The reign of Ahab is similarly summarised. His marriage with Jezebel, and the flood of Baal worship which that let loose over the land, are told with horror, in preparation for Elijah's appearance like a dark background that throws up a brilliant figure.

The lessons to be drawn from these severely condensed records, cut down to the bone, as it were, are plain. The first of them is, that when a life is over, the one thing which lasts, or is worth thinking about, is the man's relation to God and His will. Here are twelve years' reign in the one case, and twenty-two in the other, all boiled down, so to speak, into half a dozen sentences, and estimated according to one standard only. What has become of all the eager strife, the joys and sorrows, the hopes and fears, that burned so fiercely for awhile? All died down into a handful of grey ashes. And what lie

in them like a lump of solid metal that has been melted out of the huge heap of days and deeds that fed the fire? The man's relation to God. That abides; that is recorded; that determines everything else about him. Waving forests that once had sunshine pouring down on their green fronds are represented in a thin seam of coal. Our lives will all come down to this at last. How did he stand towards God and His will is the final question that will be asked about each of us, and the answer to it is the only thing that concerns the dead—or the living either. Men write voluminous biographies of each other. How little their judgments matter to the dead men! Praise or blame are equally indifferent to them. But what matters is, whether God will have to record of us what is recorded of these two wretched kings, or whether He will recognise that the main drift of our poor lives was to serve Him and do His will. He was a great scholar; he made a huge fortune; he rose to be a peer; she was a noted beauty, a leader of fashion, a queen of society—what will all such epitaphs be worth, if God's finger carves silently below them, 'He did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord'?

Another lesson from these two reigns is the certain widening of the smallest departure from God. Jeroboam professed to retain the worship of Jehovah, and to introduce only a small alteration in setting up a symbol of Him. He would vehemently have asserted that he was no idolater, and would have shuddered at the very notion of bowing down to the gods of the nations, but in less than fifty years a temple to the Sidonian Baal rose in Samaria, and his worship, with its foul sensuality, was corrupting all Israel. How-

ever acute the angle of departure, the line has only to be prolonged, and the distance between it and that from which it diverged will be the distance between heaven and hell. Let no one say: 'Thus far and no farther will I go.' There is no stopping at will on that course, any more than a man sliding down a steeply sloping sheet of smooth ice can pull himself up before he plunges over the edge into the abyss below. That is true as to all departures from God and His law, but it is eminently true as to every tampering with the spirituality of worship. Jeroboam's symbolism led straight to Ahab's unblushing pagan worship of the hideous Sidonian Baal. The craving for symbolical and sensuous accessories of worship, which is strong in most Churches in this æsthetic generation, is perilous. Material aids to worship there must be, so long as we are in the flesh, but the fewer and simpler they are the better, for they are aids which very swiftly become hindrances.

Another lesson from Ahab's reign is the need of detachment from entangling alliances, if we would keep ourselves right with God. It was Israel's calling to be separate from the nations. It was Israel's temptation either to mix with them, or to keep aloof from them in contempt and hatred. Ahab's marriage with Jezebel was, no doubt, thought by his father a clever stroke of policy, assuring them of an ally. But it flooded the nation with the cruel and lustful cult of Baal, and that finally ruined Ahab and his house. God's servants can never mingle themselves with His enemies without harm, unless they mingle with them for the purpose of turning them into His servants. If we prefer the company of those who do not love Jesus, our love to Him must be faint, and will soon be fainter.

If Ahab takes Jezebel for his wife, Ahab will soon take Jezebel's foul god for his god.

A PROPHET'S STRANGE PROVIDERS

'And Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the inhabitants of Gilead, said unto Ahab, As the Lord God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word. 2. And the word of the Lord came unto him, saying, 3. Get thee hence, and turn thee eastward, and hide thyself by the brook Cherith, that is before Jordan. 4. And it shall be, that thou shalt drink of the brook; and I have commanded the ravens to feed thee there. 5. So he went and did according unto the word of the Lord: for he went and dwelt by the brook Cherith, that is before Jordan. 6. And the ravens brought him bread and flesh in the morning, and bread and flesh in the evening; and he drank of the brook. 7. And it came to pass after a while, that the brook dried up, because there had been no rain in the land. 8. And the word of the Lord came unto him, saying, 9. Arise, get thee to Zarephath, which belongeth to Zidon, and dwell there: behold, I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee. 10. So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, behold, the widow woman was there gathering of sticks: and he called to her, and said, Fetch me, I pray thee, a little water in a vessel, that I may drink. 11. And as she was going to fetch it, he called to her, and said, Bring me, I pray thee, a morsel of bread in thine hand. 12. And she said, As the Lord thy God liveth, I have not a cake, but an handful of meal in a barrel, and a little oil in a cruse: and, behold, I am gathering twosticks, that I may go in and dress it for me and my son, that we may eat it, and die. 13. And Elijah said unto her, Fear not; go and do as thou hast said: but make me thereof a little cake first, and bring it unto me, and after make for thee and for thy son. 14. For thus saith the Lord God of Israel, The barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that the Lord sendeth rain upon the earth. 15. And she went and did according to the saying of Elijah: and she, and he, and her house, did eat many days. 16. And the barrel of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord, which He spake by Elijah.'—1 KINGS xvii. 1-16.

THE worst times need the best men. The reign of Ahab brought a great outburst of Baal worship, imported by his Phœnician wife, which threatened to sweep away every trace of the worship of Jehovah. The feeble king was absolutely ruled by the strong-willed Jezebel, and everything seemed rushing down to ruin. One man arrests the downward movement, and with no weapon but his word, and no support but his own dauntless courage, which was the child of his faith, works a revolution in Israel. 'Among them that are born of women there hath not arisen a greater

than' Elijah the Tishbite. Rugged, stern, solitary, he has no commission to reveal new truth. He is not a 'prophet,' like later ones whose words were revelation.

Little is preserved of his sayings. His task was to reform and restore, not to advance; and his endowments of 'spirit and power' corresponded to his work. The striking peculiarities of this heroic figure will appear as we go on with his history. For the present, we have to consider the three points of this narrative.

I. The Prophet and the King.—The startling suddenness of Elijah's leap into the arena, where he appears without preface or explanation, helps the impression of extraordinary force which his whole career makes. He crashes into the midst of Ahab's court like a thunderbolt. What did Jezebel think of this wild man from the other side of Jordan, with his long hair and his loose mantle, who thus fronted Ahab and her? Nothing is told us of his descent; it is even questionable whether the reading which calls him 'the Tishbite' is correct. We only know that he was of Gilead, and therefore used to a ruder, freer, simpler life than that in kings' palaces.

The natural conclusion from the narrative is that the prophet and the king had never met before; and, if so, the stern brevity of the threat is even more remarkable. In any case, the absence of explanation of reasons for the drought, or of credentials of Elijah, or of offers of mercy on condition of repentance, give a peculiarly grim aspect to the message, and make it a dangerous one to carry to such a hearer as Ahab, stirred up by Jezebel. When God commands us to speak, no thought of peril must make us dumb. If the

'word of the Lord' is to sound from our lips with power, it must first have absolute sway over ourselves. One man with God at his back, who fears nothing, can work marvels.

God's servant is men's master. The vision of God's Presence paled the splendour, and blunted the perils, of the court of Samaria. Ahab was but a poor puppet in the sight of eyes that 'saw the Lord sitting on His throne, high and lifted up.' So the very first words of Elijah lay bare the secret spring of his fiery energy and courage. 'Before whom I stand,'—that is the thought to put nerve, daring, and disregard of earth into a man.

James's comment on this incident assumes that the declaration to Ahab followed earnest prayer that it might not rain, and that the 'word' which should end the drought was also prayer. The truest lover of his country or of any men may sometimes have to wish for losses and sorrows. Elijah did not open and shut the heavens, but his prayer had power to move the Hand that 'openeth and no man shutteth.'

II. The Prophet and the Ravens.—One would like to know how Elijah made his escape from Ahab; but the whole story is marked by sudden appearances and disappearances. He flashes into sight and flames for a moment, and then is swallowed up in the dark again. The exact position of the brook Cherith is doubtful. It would seem most natural to look for it across Jordan, as safer and more familiar ground to Elijah than any of the tributaries on the western side. At all events, somewhere among the savage rocks in some wady with a trickle of water down it, and rank vegetation that would help to hide him, he lurked for an indefinite period, alone with God.

Why did he flee? Not only for safety, but that the period of the drought might be prolonged till it had done its work, and that the prophet might learn more lessons for his calling. Good Obadiah would have made a place for the chief of the prophets in his caves; but the man who is to do work like Elijah's must live in solitude. Cherith was part of the training for Carmel. The flight thither was as much an act of obedient faith as was the appearance before the king. However the necessity of flight was impressed on the prophet, it *was* impressed on him as manifestly not his own plan, but God's command; and though the journey was a weary one, and the appointed place of refuge inhospitable, the command was unhesitatingly obeyed. He was not left to wonder how he was to be fed when he got there, but God gave him, what He seldom gives—a previous assurance of miraculous provision, which obviously met some unspoken thought. We do not usually know how we are to be fed in the solitude till we get there; but if our doubting hearts object, 'But, Lord, there is nothing at Cherith but a brook and some ravens,' He sometimes gives us assurance that these will be enough. Whether or no, the duty is the same,—to follow God's voice, whether it take us face to face with Ahab and Jezebel or into the wild gorge.

Note that the same words are employed about the ravens and the widow: 'I have commanded the . . . to feed thee.' God has ways of reaching the mysterious animal instinct and the mysterious human will, and each, in its own way, obeys. It is needless to try to pare down the miracle by saying that, of course, ravens would haunt the water-courses in drought, and that the food which they brought might be for their young,

and so on. The daily regularity of the supply takes it out of the natural category, to say nothing of the remarkable breed which the ravens must have been of, if they brought their young ones' food within reach and let the prophet take it.

People take offence at the abundance of miracles in the lives of Elijah and Elisha, and assert that some of them, this among the rest, are for unworthily trivial occasions. But the grave crisis in Israel is to be taken into account, which involved the necessity for unusual manifestations of divine power, and very evident credentials for the prophets; and the preparation of Elijah for his tremendous struggle was, even to our eyes, surely an adequate end for miracle. How could he doubt that God had sent him and would care for him, with such memories as those of his winged purveyors? How could he doubt future words which should come to him, when he recalled how marvellously this one had been fulfilled? The silence of the ravine, the long days and nights of solitude, the punctual arrival of his food, would all tend to weld his faith into yet more close-knit strength. If we may so say, it was worth God's while to work miracles, to make Elijah. The highest end of creation is the production of God-fearing men. All things serve the soul that serves God.

III. The Prophet and the Widow.—The little stream that came down the wady dried up 'after a while'; and Elijah, no doubt, would wonder what was to be done next, as he saw it daily sending a thinner thread to Jordan. But he was not told till the channel was dry, and the pebbles in its bed bleaching in the sun. God makes us sometimes wait on beside a diminishing rivulet, and keeps us ignorant of the next step, till it is

dry. Patience is an element in strength. It was a far cry from Cherith to Zarephath, right across the kingdom of Ahab; and to run for refuge to a dependency of Zidon, Jezebel's country, looked like putting his head in the lion's mouth. But the same 'command' which the ravens had obeyed had smoothed his way.

So he girded up his loins, and left, no doubt reluctantly, the brook for a city. How his heart would bow in adoring thankfulness, when the first person he saw outside the little 'city' was 'the widow'! He knew her; did she know him? The natural interpretation of verse 9 is that, at the time when God spoke to Elijah, he had already 'commanded' the woman. But the despondent tone of her answer seems against that idea; and perhaps we are to suppose that, just as the ravens were commanded and knew not by whom, so this woman received the command, when she saw the travel-stained and gaunt stranger, through her womanly impulses of compassion, not knowing who moved them nor what she did when she sheltered the man whose life was, at that moment, the most important in the world. The motions of pity and charity are of God, and He commands us to help when He sets before us those who need help.

The whole incident was a lesson to the prophet. He might well have thought that God had sent him to a strange helper in this poor widow with her empty cupboard; and it must have taken some faith on his part to reassure her with his cheery 'Fear not!' The prediction of the undiminishing stores demanded as much faith from its speaker as from its hearer.

It was a lesson in faith for the woman too. Her use of the phrase 'the Lord thy God' may imply some in-

clination to the worship of Jehovah, and so there may have been a little glimmer of faith in her; but she was full of sorrow and despair, and yet willing to help the stranger with the 'little water in a vessel,' though the 'morsel of bread in thine hand' was beyond her power. Elijah's apparently selfish demand that his wants should be looked after first was a test of her faith. Sometimes self-denying duty is made clearly imperative on us, before we hear the promise which, believed, will make it easy. They who have ears to hear the command, and hearts to obey, even if it seem to strip them of all, will soon hear the assurance that secures abundance. The barrel would have been empty by nightfall, if the meal in it had been used for the woman and her son. The continuance of supply depended on her obedience, which, in its turn, depended on faith in the prophet as a messenger of God. 'There is that scattereth, and yet increaseth.' The use of earthly goods for God's service may not be rewarded with the increase of them; but, if the barrel is not kept full of meal, the heart will be kept full of peace, which is better. No sacrifice for God is ever thrown away. He remains in no man's debt.

The incident has a further bearing, as an instance of a divine benediction resting on heathendom. The synagogue at Nazareth pointed that lesson for us. Elijah and the widow both learned that the God of Israel is the God of all the earth, and that His prophets have a mission to every race. The woman rebuked, by her pity and self-denying benevolence, the prejudices of Israel; the prophet foreshadowed, by his familiar abode with one won from idolatry to the worship of God, the universal aspect of the Jewish religion, and its destiny to overleap the narrow bounds of the

nation. Charity and pity have no geographical limits. Much less can the love of God and the light of His revelation be bounded by any narrower circle than the circumference of the world.

ELIJAH STANDING BEFORE THE LORD

And Elijah the Tishbite . . . said . . . As the Lord God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand. —1 KINGS xvii. 1.

THIS solemn and remarkable adjuration seems to have been habitual upon Elijah's lips in the great crises of his life. We never find it used by any but himself, and his scholar and successor, Elisha. Both of them employ it under similar circumstances, as if unveiling the very secret of their lives, the reason for their strength, and for their undaunted bearing and bold fronting of all antagonism. We find four instances in their two lives of the use of the phrase. Elijah bursts abruptly on the stage and opens his mouth for the first time to Ahab, to proclaim the coming of that terrible and protracted drought; and he bases his prophecy on that great oath, 'As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand.' And again, when he is sent to confront Ahab once more at the close of the period, the same mighty word comes, 'As the Lord of Hosts liveth, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself unto him this day.' And then again, Elisha, when he is brought before the three confederate kings, who taunt, and threaten, and flatter, to try to draw smooth things from his lips, and get his sanction to their mad warfare, turns upon the poor creature that called himself the King of Israel with a superb contempt that stayed itself on that same great name,

and tells him, 'As the Lord liveth before whom I stand, were it not that I had regard for the King of Judah, I would not look toward you or see you.' And lastly, when the grateful Naaman seeks to change the whole character of Elisha's miracle, and to turn it into the coarseness of a thing done for reward, once again the temptation is brushed aside with that solemn word, 'As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand, I will receive none.'

So at every crisis where these prophets were brought full front with hostile power; where a tremendous message was laid upon their hearts and lips to utter; where natural strength would fail; where they were likely to be daunted or dazzled by temptations, by either the sweetness or the terrors of material things, these two great heroes of the Old Covenant, out of sight the strongest men in the old Jewish history, steady themselves by one thought,—God lives, and I am His servant.

For that phrase, 'before whom I stand,' obviously means chiefly 'whom I serve.' It is found, for instance, in Deuteronomy, where the priest's office is thus defined: 'The sons of Levi shall stand before the Lord to minister unto Him.' And in the same way, it is used in the Queen of Sheba's wondering exclamation to Solomon, 'Blessed are thy servants, and blessed are the men that stand before thy face continually.'

So that the consciousness that they were servants of the living God was the very secret of the power of these men. This expression, which thus started to their lips in moments of strain and trial, lets us see into the very inmost heart of their strength. These two great lives, which fill so large a space in the records of the past, and will be remembered for ever, were

braced and ennobled thus. The same grand thought is available to brace and ennoble our little lives, that will soon be forgotten but by a loving heart or two, and yet may be as full of God and of God's service as those of any of the great of old. We too may use this secret of power, 'The Lord liveth, before whom I stand.'

What thoughts then, which may tend to lift and invigorate our days, are included in these words? The first is surely this—Life a constant vision of God's presence.

How distinct and abiding must the vision of God have been, which burned before the inward eye of the man that struck out that phrase! 'Wherever I am, whatever I do, I am before Him. To my purged eye, there is the Apocalypse of heaven, and I behold the great throne, and the solemn ranks of ministering spirits, my fellow-servants, hearkening to the voice of His word.' No excitement of work, no strain of effort, no distraction of circumstances, no glitter of gold, no dazzle of earthly brightness, dimmed that vision for these prophets. In some measure, it was with them as it shall be perfectly with all one day, 'His servants serve Him, and see His face,'—action not interrupting vision, nor vision weakening action. To preserve thus fresh and unimpaired, amidst strenuous work and many temptations, the clear consciousness of being 'ever in the great Taskmaster's eye,' needs resolute effort and much self-restraint. It is hard to set the Lord always before us; but it is possible, and in the measure in which we do it, we shall not be moved.

How nobly the steadfastness and superiority to all temptations which such a vision gives, are illustrated

by the occasions, in these prophets' lives, in which this expression came to their lips! The servant of the Heavenly King speaks from his present intuition. As he speaks, he sees the throne in the heavens, and the Sovereign Ruler there, and the sight bears him up from quailing before the earthly monarchs whom he had to beard, and in connection with whom three out of the four instances of the use of the phrase occur. How small Ahab and his court must have looked to eyes that were full of the undazzling brightness of the true King of Israel, and the ordered ranks of *His* attendants! How little the greatness! How tawdry the pomp! How impotent the power, and how toothless the threats! The poor show of the earthly king paled before that awful vision, as a dim candle will show black against the sun. 'I stand before the living God, and thou, O Ahab! art but a shadow and a noise.' Just as we may have looked upon some mountain scene, where all the highest summits were wrapt in mist, and the lower hills looked mighty and majestic, until some puff of wind came and rolled up the curtain that had shrined and hidden the icy pinnacles and peaks that were higher up. And as that solemn white apocalypse rose and towered to the heavens, we forgot all about the green hills below, because our eyes beheld the mighty summits that live amongst the stars, and sparkle white through eternity.

My brethren, here is our defence against being led away by the gauds and shows of earth's vulgar attractions, or being terrified by the poor terrors of its enmity. Go with that talisman in your hand, 'The Lord liveth, before whom I stand,' and everything else dwindles down into nothingness, and you are a free man, master and lord of all things, because you are

God's servants, seeing all things aright, because you see them all in God, and God in them all.

Still further, we may say that this phrase is the utterance and expression of a consciousness that life was echoing with the voice of the divine command. Elijah stands before the Lord, not only feeling in his thrilling spirit that God is ever near him, but also that His word is ever coming forth to him, with imperative authority. That is the prophet's conception of life. Wherever he is, he hears a voice saying, 'This is the way, walk ye in it.' Every place where he stands is as the very holy place of the oracles of the Most High, the spot in the innermost shrine where the voice of God is audible. All circumstances are the voice of God, commanding or restraining. He is evermore pursued, nay, rather upheld and guided, by an all-embracing law. That law is no mere utterance of cold impersonal duty,—a thought which may make men slaves, but never makes them good. But it is the voice of the living God, loving and beloved, whose tender care for His children modulates His tone, while He commands them for their good. He speaks because He loves; His law is life. The heart that hears Him speak is filled with music.

Ahab and Jehoram, and all the kings of the earth, may thunder and lighten, may threaten and flatter, may command and forbid, as they list. They and their words are nought to him whose trembling ears have heard, and whose obedient heart has received, a higher command, and to whom, 'across the storm,' comes the deeper voice of the one true Commander, whom alone it is a glory absolutely to obey, even 'the Lord, before whom I stand.' People talk about the consciousness of 'a mission.' The important point, on the settling

of which depends the whole character of our lives, is—Who do you suppose gave you your ‘mission’? Was it any *person* at all? or have you any consciousness that any will but your own has anything to say about your life? These prophets had found One whom it was worth while to obey, whatever came of it, and whoever stood in the way. May it be so with you and me, my friend! Let us try always to feel that in the commonest things we may hear the command of God; that the trifles of each day—trifles though they be—vibrate and sound with the reverberation of His great voice; that in all the outward circumstances of our lives, as in all the deep recesses of our hearts, we may trace the indications and rudiments of His will concerning us, which He has perfectly given us in that Gospel which is ‘the law of liberty,’ and in Him who is the Gospel and the perfect Law. Then quietly, without bluster or mock-heroics, or making a fuss about our independence, we can put all other commands and commanders in their right place, with the old words, ‘With me it is a very small matter to be judged of you, or of man’s judgment; He that judgeth me,’ and He that commandeth me, ‘is the Lord.’ In answer to all the noise about us we can face round like Elijah, and say, ‘As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand.’ He is my ‘Imperator,’ the Autocrat and Commander of my life; and Him, and Him only, must I serve. What calmness, what dignity that would put into our lives! The never-ceasing boom of the great ocean, as it breaks on the beach, drowns all smaller sounds. Those lives are noble and great in which that deep voice is ever dominant, sounding on through all lesser voices, and day and night filling the soul with command and awe.

Then, still further, we may take another view of these words. They are the utterance of a man to whom his life was not only bright with the radiance of a divine presence, and musical with the voice of a divine command, but was also, on his part, full of conscious obedience. No man could say such a thing of himself who did not feel that he was rendering a real, earnest, though imperfect obedience to God. So, though in one view the words express a very lowly sense of absolute submission before God, in another view they make a lofty claim for the utterer. He professes that he stands before the Lord, girt for His service, watching to be guided by His eye, and ready to run when He bids. It is the same lofty sense of communion and consecration, issuing in authority over others, which Elijah's true brother in later days, Paul the Apostle, put forth when he made known to his companions in shipwreck the will of 'the God, whose I am, and whom I serve.' We may well shrink from making that claim for ourselves, when we think of the poor, perfunctory service and partial consecration which our lives show. But let us rejoice that even we may venture to say, 'Truly I am Thy servant'; if only we, like the Psalmist, rest the confession on the perfectness of what He has done for us, rather than on the imperfection of what we have done for Him; and lay, as its foundation, 'Thou hast loosed my bonds.' Then, though we must ever feel how poor our service, and how unprofitable ourselves, how little we deserve the honour, and how impossible that we should ever earn the least mite of wages; yet we may, in all lowliness, think of ourselves as set free that we may serve, and lift our eyes, as the eyes of a servant turn towards his master, to 'the living Lord, before whom we stand.

Such a life is necessarily a happy life. The one misery of man is self-will, the one secret of blessedness is the conquest over our own wills. To yield them up to God is rest and peace. If we 'stand before God,' then that means that our wills are brought into harmony with His. And that means that the one poison drop is squeezed out of our lives, and that sweetness and joy are infused into them. For what disturbs us in this world is not 'trouble,' but our opposition to trouble. The true source of all that frets and irritates, and wears away our lives, is not in external things, but in the resistance of our wills to the will of God expressed by external things. I suppose that we shall never here bring these wills of ours into perfect correspondence with His, any more than we shall ever, with our shaking hands and blunt pencils, draw a perfectly straight line. But if will and heart are brought even to a rude approach to parallelism with His, if we accept His voice when He takes away, and obey it when He commands, we shall be quiet and peaceful. We shall be strong and unwearied, freed from corroding cares and exhausting rebellions, which take far more out of a man than any work does. 'Thy word was found, and I did eat it.' When we thus take God's command into our spirits, and feed upon it with will and understanding, it becomes, as the Psalmist found it, the 'joy and rejoicing of our hearts.' Elijah-like, we shall 'go in the strength of that meat many days.' The secret of power and of calm is—yield your will to the loving Lord, and stand ever before Him with, 'Here am I, send me!'

We may add one more remark to these various views of the significance of this expression, to which the last instance of its use may help us. Here it is: 'And

Naaman said, I pray thee, take a blessing of thy servant. But he said, As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand, I will receive none.'

The thought, which made all Elisha's life bright with the light of God's presence, which filled his ear with the unremitting voice of a Divine Law, which swayed and bowed his will to joyful obedience, chilled and deadened his desires for all earthly rewards. 'I am not thy servant. I am God's servant. It is not your business to pay my wages. I cannot dishonour my Master by taking payment from thee for doing His work. I look for everything from Him, for nothing from thee.'

And is there not a broad general truth involved there, namely, that such a life as we have been describing will find its sole reward where it finds its inspiration and its law? The Master's approval is the servant's best wages. If we truly feel that 'the Lord *liveth*, before whom we stand,' we shall want nothing else for our work but His smile, and we shall feel that the light of His face is all that we need. That thought should deaden our love for outward things. How little we need to care about any payment that the world can give for anything we do! If we feel, as we ought, that we are God's servants, that will lift us clear above the low aims and desires which meet us. How little we shall care for money, for men's praise, for getting on in the world! How the things that we fever our souls by pursuing, and fret our hearts when we lose, will cease to attract! How small and vulgar the 'prizes' of life, as people call them, will appear! 'The Lord *liveth*, before whom I stand,' should be enough for us, and instead of all these motives to action drawn from the rewards of this world, we ought

to 'labour that, whether present or absent, we may be well-pleasing to Him.'

Not the fading leaves of the victor's wreath, laurel though they be, nor the corruptible things as silver and gold, whereof earth's diadems and rewards are fashioned, but the incorruptible crown that fadeth not away, which His hand will give, should fire our hope, and shine before our faith. Not Naaman's gifts but God's approval is Elisha's reward. Not the praise from lips that will perish, or the 'hollow wraith of dying fame,' but Christ's 'Well done! good and faithful servant,' should be a Christian's aim.

May we, brethren, possess the 'spirit and the power of Elias';—the spirit, in that we know ourselves to be the servants of the living God; and then we shall have some measure of his dauntless power and heroic unworldliness!

Still better, may we have the Spirit of Him who was 'the Servant of the Lord,' diviner in His gentle meekness than the fiery prophet in his lonely strength! Make yours the mind that was in Christ, that you too may say, 'Lo, I come! in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do Thy will, yea, Thy law is within my heart.'

OBADIAH

To the Young

'... I thy servant fear the Lord from my youth. —1 KINGS xviii. 12.

THIS Obadiah is one of the obscurer figures in the Old Testament. We never hear of him again, for there is no reason to accept the Jewish tradition which alleges that he was Obadiah the prophet. And yet how dis-

tinctly he stands out from the canvas, though he is only sketched with a few bold outlines! He is the 'governor over Ahab's house,' a kind of mayor of the palace, and probably the second man in the kingdom. But though thus high in that idolatrous and self-willed court, he has bravely kept true to the ancient faith. Neither Jezebel's flatteries nor her frowns have moved him. But there, amid apostasy and idolatry he stands, probably all alone in the court, a worshipper of Jehovah. His name is his character, for it means 'servant of Jehovah.' It was not a light thing to be a worshipper of the God of Israel in Ahab's court. The feminine rage of the fierce Sidonian woman, whom Ahab obeyed in most things, burned hot against the enemies of her father's gods, and hotter, perhaps, against any one who thwarted her imperious will. Obadiah did both, in that audacious piece of benevolence when he sheltered the Lord's prophets—one hundred of them—and saved them from her cruel search. The writer of the book very rightly marks this brave antagonism to the outburst of the queen's wrath as a signal proof of a more than ordinary devotion to the worship and fear of Jehovah. His firmness and his religion did not prevent his retaining his place of honour and dignity. That says something for Ahab, and more perhaps for Obadiah.

Most of you believe that you ought to 'fear the Lord': but you are apt to put off, and so I wish to urge on you that you should give your hearts to Jesus Christ at once.

I. The blessedness of youthful religion.

(a) It guards from many temptations, and keeps a character innocent of much transgression.

Think of the dangers that lie thick in the streets of every great city, and of a lad coming up from a country

home of godliness, where he was surrounded by a mother's love and an atmosphere of purity, and launched into some lonely lodging, or some factory or warehouse with many tempters. Nothing will be such a help to resistance and victory as to be able to say, 'So did not I because of the fear of the Lord.'

(b) It will save from remorse. Even if a man 'sobers down' after 'sowing his wild oats,' which is a very problematical 'if,' what bitter memories of wasted days, what polluting memories of filthy ones, will haunt him! And if he does not sober down, what then?

It is folly to begin life on a wrong tack, in regard to which the best that you can say is that you do not mean to continue it. If you do not, then the wise thing is to get at once on to the road on which you do mean to continue, and to save the weary work of retracing steps and the painful consciousness of having made a false start. Are you so sure that you will wish, or that it will be possible, to face right about and get on to a new line? Fishermen catch lobsters and the like by means of baskets with one opening, the withes of which are so set that the entrance is easy, but that a ring of sharp points oppose all attempts at turning back and getting out. The world lays 'pots' of that sort, and many a young man and woman glides smoothly in, and finds it impossible to get out.

(c) It usually leads to a deeper and more peaceful and harmonious religion than is attained by those who have given the world the better part of their days, and have only the last fragment of them to give to God. Obadiah had feared God from his youth, and that had a good deal to do with his brave stand against Jezebel. It is a grand thing to enlist habit on the side of godliness.

II. The foes of youthful religion.

There are foes within. . . the strong self-reliance and bounding life proper to youth, without which at the opening of the flower, the bloom would be poor and the fruit little, . . . the power of appeals to the unjaded and physically strong senses, . . . the difficulty at such a stage of life of looking forward and soberly regarding the end.

There are foes without. . . the crowds of tempters of both sexes, men and women who take a devilish pleasure in polluting innocent minds, . . . the companions whose jeers are worse to face than a battery, . . . the inconsistencies of so-called Christians, the anti-Christian literature which is peculiarly fascinating to the young, with its brave show of breaking with mouldy tradition and enthroning reason and emancipating from rusty fetters.

III. The too probable alternative to youthful religion.

It is but too likely that, if a man does not 'fear the Lord' from 'his youth,' he will never fear Him. Thank God, there is no time nor condition of life in which the wicked man cannot 'forsake his way,' or 'the unrighteous man his thoughts,' and 'turn to the Lord' with the assurance that 'He will abundantly pardon.' But it is sadly too plain to observation, and to the experience of some of us, that obstacles grow with years, that habits and associations grip with increasing power, that in all things our natures become less flexible, the supple sapling becoming gnarled and tough, that a middle-aged or old man is more inextricably 'tied and bound by the cords of his sins,' than a young one is.

Sin lies to us by first saying, 'It is too soon to be religious,' and then it lies to us by saying, 'It is too late.'

The inclination diminishes.

The Gospel long heard and long put aside, loses power.

Contrast the beauty of a course of life, begun on the same lines as those on which it ends, and being like 'the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the meridian of the day,' with one which gave the greater part of its years to 'the world, the flesh, and the devil,' or at least to one's godless self, and the dregs of it only to God.

THE TRIAL BY FIRE

'And Elijah said unto the prophets of Baal, Choose you one bullock for yourselves, and dress it first; for ye are many; and call on the name of your gods, but put no fire under. 26. And they took the bullock which was given them, and they dressed it, and called on the name of Baal from morning even until noon, saying, O Baal, hear us. But there was no voice, nor any that answered. And they leaped upon the altar which was made. 27. And it came to pass at noon, that Elijah mocked them, and said, Cry aloud: for he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awaked. 28. And they cried aloud, and cut themselves after their manner with knives and lancets, till the blood gushed out upon them. 29. And it came to pass, when midday was passed, and they prophesied until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that there was neither voice, nor any to answer, nor any that regarded. 30. And Elijah said unto all the people, Come near unto me. And all the people came near unto him. And he repaired the altar of the Lord that was broken down. 31. And Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, unto whom the word of the Lord came, saying, Israel shall be thy name: 32. And with the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord: and he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two measures of seed. 33. And he put the wood in order, and cut the bullock in pieces, and laid him on the wood, and said, Fill four barrels with water, and pour it on the burnt sacrifice, and on the wood. 34. And he said, Do it the second time. And they did it the second time. And he said, Do it the third time. And they did it the third time. 35. And the water ran round about the altar; and he filled the trench also with water. 36. And it came to pass at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that Elijah the prophet came near, and said, Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that Thou art God in Israel, and that I am Thy servant, and that I have done all these things at Thy word. 37. Hear me, O Lord, hear me: that this people may know that Thou art the Lord God, and that Thou hast turned their heart back again. 38. Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. 39. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces: and they said, The Lord, he is the God; the Lord, he is the God.'—1 KINGS xviii. 25-39.

THE place, the purpose, and the actors in this scene, make it among the grandest in history. A nation, with its king, has come together, at the bidding of one

man, to settle no less a question than whom they shall worship. There, on the slope of Carmel, with the brassy heaven gleaming hard and dry above them, and the yellow, burnt-up plain of Jezreel at their feet, the expectant people stand. The assembly was a singular proof of Elijah's ascendancy; for Ahab's bluster had sunk, cowed in his presence, and he had meekly done the prophet's bidding in summoning 'all Israel' and the eight hundred and fifty Baal and Asherah prophets, for an unexplained purpose. The false priests would come unwillingly; but they came.

Then Elijah takes the command, and, though utterly alone, towers above the crowd in the courage of his undaunted confidence in his message. His words have the ring of authority as he rebukes indecision, and calls for a clear adhesion to Baal or Jehovah. If the people had answered, the trial by fire would have been needless. But their silence shows that they waver, and therefore he makes his proposal to them.

Note that the priests are not consulted, nor is Ahab. The former would have had some excuse for shirking the sharp issue; but the people's assent forced them to accept the ordeal,—reluctantly enough, no doubt.

I. The vain cries to a deaf God. It is strange that one of the parties to the test has power to determine its conditions, especially as Elijah's prophetic authority was one of the things in dispute; but it is a sign of the magnetic power which one bold man with absolute confidence in his own convictions exercises over men. The Baal prophets are given every advantage in priority of action. Error is best unmasked by being allowed free opportunity to do its best; for the more favourable the circumstances of trial, the more signal the defeat. God's servants must never be suspected of

unfair tricks in their controversy with error. They can afford to let it try first. Notice the substitution of 'your god,' in the Revised Version, for 'your gods' in the Authorised Version. That is obviously right; for the only question was about one god,—namely, Baal.

So, in the early morning, with all the people gazing at them, the Baal priests or prophets begin their attempt. It was easy to prepare the sacrifice, and lay it on the altar,—though, no doubt, it was done sullenly, with foreboding of the coming exposure. The whole account of the wild invocations of the priests may suggest some of the characteristics of idolatry, and touch our hearts with pity, as well as with the sense of its absurdity, which animated Elijah's mockery.

Note, then, the vivid picture, in verse 27, of the long hours of vain crying. On the one hand, we hear the wild chorus echoing among the rocks; on the other, we feel the dead silence in the heavens.

The monotonous and almost mechanical repetition of the invocation, prolonged till the syllables have no meaning to the yelling crowd, is characteristic of the frenzied excitement so common in idolatry. To call such howlings prayer, degrades the name. They are the very opposite of that sacred communion of a believing soul with the God whom it knows, trusts, and beseeches with submission. Neither knowledge nor trust is in these shrieks, which seek to propitiate the stern god by repeating his name as a kind of charm. Heathenism has no true prayer. Wild cries and passionate desires, flung upwards to an unloved god, are not prayer; and that solace and anchor of the troubled soul is wanting in all the dreary lands given up to idolatry.

The melancholy persistence of the unanswered cries

may stand as a symbol of the tragic obstinacy with which their devotees cling to their vain gods,—a rebuke to us with a more enlightened faith. The silence, which was the only answer, is put in strong contrast with the continuous roar of the four hundred and fifty,—so long and loud the hoarse cries here, so unmoved the stillness in the careless heaven. That, too, is typical of heathenism, which is sad with un-availing cries and ignorant of answers to any. As the day wore on, and the voices grew hoarse, and hope declined, more violent bodily exercise was resorted to, and the shouting crowd danced (or, perhaps, as the margin says, ‘limped,’—a picturesque and contemptuous word for the grotesque contortions around the altar), as if that might bring the answer. That again is a feature common to all heathenism. No wonder that Elijah’s scorn broke forth vehemently at such a sight. Noon was the hour of the sun’s greatest power, and, since Baal was probably a solar deity, it was the hour when, if ever, he would spare one of his abundant fiery beams to light the pyre. So Elijah’s taunts came just when they were most biting, and none can say that they were undeserved. His fiery zeal and his naturally stern character broke out in the bitter irony with which he imagines a variety of undignified positions for Baal.

Sarcasm is not the highest weapon, and the ‘spirit of Elijah’ is not the spirit of Jesus; but the exposure of the absurdity of idolatry is legitimate, and even ridicule may have its place in pricking wind-distended bladders. A man throttling a serpent may be excused using anything that comes handy for the purpose. But, at the same time, the right attitude for us as Christians in the presence of that awful fact of idolatry,

is neither contempt nor scientific curiosity, but pity deep as Christ's, and earnest resolve to help our darkened brethren. The taunts stirred to fiercer excitement and more extravagant acts, as ridicule is wont to do, and therein proves itself an unreliable instrument of controversy. Laughing at a man generally makes him more obstinate. The priests answered Elijah by savagely gashing their half-naked bodies with knives and lances,—a ready way to make blood come, but not to bring fire. The frenzy became wilder as the day declined, and at last, covered with blood, hoarse with shouting, panting with their gymnastics, they 'prophesied,' having wrought themselves into that state of excitement in which incoherent rhapsodies burst from their lips. What a scene to call worship! That is what millions of men are ready to practise to-day. And all the while there is no voice, no answer, no care for them, in the pitiless sky. The very genius of idolatry is set before us in that tumultuous crowd on Carmel.

II. The sacrifice of faith and the answer by fire. We pass from a scene of wild commotion into an atmosphere of sacred calm in verse 30. The contrast is striking. The fiery fervours of the day are past, and the sun is sinking behind the top of Carmel, and there is much to do before it sets. Elijah with his own hands, as would appear, repairs a ruined altar among the woods. Probably it had been erected for secret worship of Jehovah by some faithful amid the national apostasy, when access to Jerusalem was forbidden them, and had been destroyed by Ahab in his crusade against Jehovah worshippers. The selection of the twelve stones was symbolical of the unbroken unity of the nation, and was Elijah's protest against

the very existence of the Northern kingdom, and its assumption of the name of 'Israel.' The writer explains what was meant, when he reminds us that Israel was the name given to Jacob, and therefore, as he would have us infer, was the common property of all his descendants. Judah was a part of Israel, and Israel should be an undivided whole, uniting in all its tribes in bringing offerings to Jehovah.

It was a daring thing to do before Ahab's face; but the weak king was, for the time, subjugated by the imperious will and courage of Elijah. The building of the altar, with its mute witness to God's purpose, would touch some hearts in the gazing, silent crowd. The next step was, of course, meant to make the miracle more conspicuous by drenching everything with water, probably brought, even in that drought, from the perennial fountain near at hand. Perhaps, too, the number of barrels was intended, again, as symbolical of the twelve tribes.

One can fancy the wonder and eagerness of the people, and the dark frowns of the baffled and exhausted Baal priests, as they gradually came out of their frenzy, and knew that they had lost their opportunity. The tranquil though earnest prayer of the prophet is in sharpest contrast with the meaningless bellowings to Baal. Note in it the solemn invocation. The great Name, which all listening to him had deposed from rule over them, is set in the front; and the ancestral worship, as well as the divine gifts and dealings with the patriarchs, is pleaded with God as the reason for His answer now. The name of 'Israel,' instead of the more common 'Jacob,' has the same force as in verse 31.

Note the substance of the petitions. The deepest

desire of a truly devout soul is that God would make His name known. Zeal for God's honour and love for men who have gone astray from Him, conspire to make that the head and front of His true servant's prayers. It is God, not his own credit, about which Elijah thinks first. For himself, all that he desires is to be known as an obedient servant, and as not having done anything at the bidding of his own will or judgment, but in accordance with the all-commanding Voice.

Clearly we must suppose that in all the ordering of this sublime trial by fire, Elijah had been acting 'at Thy word,' even though we have no other record of the fact. He had no right to expect an answer unless he had been bidden to propose the test. God will honour the drafts which He bids us draw on Him; but to suspend our own or other people's faith in Him, on the issue of some experiment whether He will answer prayers, is not faith, but rash presumption, unless it is in obedience to a distinct command. Elijah had such a command, and therefore he could ask God to vindicate his action, and to prove that he was God's servant. His last petition is beautiful, both in its consciousness of power with God and recognition of his place as a prophet, and in its lowly subordination of all personal aims to the restoration of Israel to the true worship. He asks, with reiteration which is earnestness and faith, and therefore the sharpest contrast to the mechanical repetition by Baal's priests, that God would hear him; but his sole object in that prayer is, not that his name may be exalted as a prophet, or that any good may come to him, but that the blinded eyes may be opened, and the hearts, that have been so sadly led astray, be brought back to the worship of their fathers' God.

The whole brief prayer, in its calm confidence; its adoring recognition of the name and past dealings of Jehovah as the ground of trust; its throbbing of earnest desire for the manifestation of His character before men; its consciousness of personal relation to God, which humbles rather than puffs up; its beseeching for an answer, and its closing petition, which comes round again to its first, that men may know God, and fasten their hearts on Him,—may well stand as a pattern of prayer for us.

The short prayer of faith does in a moment what all the long day of crying could not do. The language in which the answer is described emulates the rapidity of the swift tongues of fire which licked up sacrifice, altar, and water. They were the tokens of acceptance, reminding of the consuming of the first sacrifices in the Tabernacle, and, like them, inaugurating a new beginning of the worship of God. The burning of the altar, as well as of the sacrifice, expressed the acceptance of the people whom it, by its twelve stones, symbolised. And the people, on their part, were—for the time, at all events—swept away by the miracle, and by the force of the prophet's example and authority. Short-lived their faith may have been, as certainly it was superficial; but the fire had for the time melted their hearts, and set them flowing in the ancient channels of devotion. The faith that is founded on miracle may be deepened into something better; but unless it is, it speedily dies away. The faith that is due to the influence of some strong personality may lead on to an independent faith, based on personal experience; but, unless it does, it too will perish.

We may find a modern reproduction of the test of Carmel in the impotence of all other schemes and

methods of social and spiritual reformation and the power of the Gospel. In it and its effects God answers by fire. Let the opposers, who are so glib in demonstrating the failure of Christianity, do the same with their enchantments, if they can.

ELIJAH'S WEAKNESS, AND ITS CURE

'And Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and withal how he had slain all the prophets with the sword. 2. Then Jezebel sent a messenger unto Elijah, saying, So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by to-morrow about this time. 3. And when he saw that, he arose, and went for his life, and came to Beersheba, which belongeth to Judah, and left his servant there. 4. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough: now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers. 5. And as he lay and slept under a juniper tree, behold, then, an angel touched him, and said unto him, Arise and eat. 6. And he looked, and, behold, there was a cake baken on the coals, and a cruse of water at his head. And he did eat and drink, and laid him down again. 7. And the angel of the Lord came again the second time, and touched him, and said, Arise and eat; because the journey is too great for thee. 8. And he arose, and did eat and drink, and went in the strength of that meat forty days and forty nights unto Horeb the mount of God. 9. And he came thither unto a cave, and lodged there, and, behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and He said unto him, What doest thou here, Elijah? 10. And he said, I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts: for the children of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant, thrown down Thine altars, and slain Thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left: and they seek my life, to take it away. 11. And He said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: 12. And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. 13. And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave. And, behold, there came a voice unto him and said, What doest thou here, Elijah? 14. And he said, I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts: because the children of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant, thrown down Thine altars, and slain Thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away. 15. And the Lord said unto him, Go, return on thy way to the wilderness of Damascus: and when thou comest, anoint Hazael to be king over Syria: 16. And Jehu the son of Nimshi shalt thou anoint to be king over Israel: and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah shalt thou anoint to be prophet in thy room. 17. And it shall come to pass, that him that escapeth the sword of Hazael shall Jehu slay: and him that escapeth from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha slay. 18. Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him.'—I KINGS xix. 1-18.

THE miracle on Carmel cowed, if it did not convince, Ahab, so that he did not oppose the slaughter of the Baal prophets; but Jezebel was made of sterner stuff,

and her passionate idolatry was proof against even a sign from heaven. Obstinacy in error is often a rebuke to tremulous faith in God. She fiercely puts her back to the wall, and defies Elijah and his God. Her threat to the prophet has a certain audacity of frankness almost approaching generosity. She will give her victim fair play. This woman is 'magnificent in sin.' The Septuagint prefixes to her oath, 'As surely as thou art Elijah and I Jezebel,' which adds force to it. It also reads, by a very slight change in the Hebrew, in verse 3, 'he was afraid,' for 'he saw,'—which is possibly right, as giving his motive for escape more distinctly.

I. We may note, first, the prophet's flight (verses 3-8). Beersheba, on the southern border of the kingdom of Judah, was eloquent of memories of the patriarchs, but though it was nearly a hundred miles from Jezreel, Jezebel's arm was long enough to reach the fugitive there, and therefore he plunged deeper into the dreary southern desert. He left behind him his servant, his 'young man,' as the original has it, whom Rabbinical tradition identified with the miraculously resuscitated son of the widow of Zarephath, and supposed to become afterwards the prophet Jonah. Thus alone but for the company of his own gloomy thoughts, and wearied with toilsome travel in the sun-smitten waste, he took shelter under the shadow of a solitary shrub (the Hebrew emphatically calls it 'one juniper,' or rather 'broom-plant'), and there the waves of depression went over him.

His complaint is not to be wondered at, though it was wrong. The very overstrain of the scene on Carmel brought reaction. The height of the crest of one wave measures the depth of the trough of the next, and no mortal spirit can keep itself at the sublime

elevation reached by Elijah when alone he fronted and converted a nation. The supposed necessity for flight, coming so immediately after apparent victory, showed him how hollow the change in the people was. What had become of all the fervency of their shout, 'The Lord, He is the God!' if they could leave Jezebel the power to carry out her threat? Solitude and the awful desert increased his gloom. The strong man had become weak, and it was ebb-tide with him. His prayer was petulant, impatient, presumptuous. What right had he to settle what was 'enough'? If he really wished to die, he could have found death at Jezreel, and had no need to travel a hundred miles to seek a grave. He was weary of his work, and profoundly disappointed by what he hastily concluded was its failure, and in a fit of faithless despondency he forgot reverence, submission, and obedience.

If Elijah can become weak, and his courage die out, and his zeal become torpid apathy and cowardly wish to shuffle off responsibility and shirk work, who shall stand? The lessons of self-distrust, of the nearness to one another of the most opposite emotions in our weak natures, of the depth of gloom into which the boldest and brightest servant of God may fall as soon as he loses hold of God's hand, never had a more striking instance to point them than that mighty prophet, sitting huddled together in utter despondency below the solitary retem bush, praying his foolish prayer for death.

The meal to which an angel twice waked him was God's answer to his prayer, telling him both that his life was still needful and that God cared for him. Perhaps one of Elijah's reasons for taking to the desert was the thought that he might starve there,

and so find death. At all events, God for the third time miraculously provides his food. The ravens, the widow of Zarephath, an angel, were his caterers; and, instead of taking away his life, God Himself sends the bread and water to preserve it. The revelation of a watchful, tender Providence often rebukes gloomy unbelief and shames us back to faith. We are not told whether the journey to Horeb was commanded, or, like the flight from Jezreel, was Elijah's own doing; but, in any case, he must have wandered in the desert, to have taken forty days to reach it.

II. The second stage is the vision at Horeb (verses 9-14). The history of Israel has never touched Horeb since Moses left it, and it is not without significance that we are once more on that sacred ground. The parallel between Moses and Elijah is very real. These two names stand out above all others in the history of the theocracy, the one as its founder, the other as its restorer; both distinguished by special revelations, both endowed with exceptional force of character and power of the Spirit; the one the lawgiver, the other the head of the prophetic order; both having something peculiar in their departure, and both standing together, in witness of their supremacy in the past, and of their inferiority in the future, by Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. The associations of the place are marked by the use of the definite article, which is missed in the Authorised Version,—‘the cave,’ that same cleft in the rock where Moses had stood. Note, too, that the word rendered ‘lodged’ is literally ‘passed the night,’ and that therefore we may suppose that the vision came to Elijah in the darkness.

That question, ‘What doest thou here?’ can scarcely be freed from a tone of rebuke; but, like Christ's to

the travellers to Emmaus, and many another interrogation from God, it is also put in order to allow of the loaded heart's relieving itself by pouring out all its griefs. God's questions are the assurance of His listening ear and sympathising heart. This one is like a little key which opens a great sluice. Out gushes a full stream. His forty days' solitude have done little for him. A true answer would have been, 'I was afraid of Jezebel.' He takes credit for zeal, and seems to insinuate that he had been more zealous for God than God had been for Himself. He forgets the national acknowledgment of Jehovah at Carmel, and the hundred prophets protected by good Obadiah. Despondency has the knack of picking its facts. It is colour-blind, and can only see dark tints. He accuses his countrymen, as if he would stir up God to take vengeance.

How different this weak and sinful wail over his solitude from the heroic mention of it on Carmel, when it only nerved his courage! (verse 22). The divine manifestation which followed is evidently meant to recall that granted to Moses on the same spot. 'The Lord passed by' is all but verbally quoted from Exodus xxxiv. 6, and the truth that had been proclaimed in words to Moses was enforced by symbol to Elijah. If the vision was in the night, as verse 9 suggests, it becomes still more impressive. The fierce wind that roared among the savage peaks, the shock that made the mountains reel, and the flashing flames that lighted up the wild landscape, were all phenomena of one kind, and at once expressed God's lordship over all destructive agencies of nature, and symbolised the more vehement and disturbing forms of energy, used by Him for the furtherance of His purposes in the field of history

or of revelation. Elijah's ministry was of such a sort, and he had now to learn the limitations of his work, and the superiority of another type, represented by the sound of gentle stillness.'

It is the same lesson which Moses learned there, when he heard that the Lord is 'a God full of compassion and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy and truth.' It was exemplified in the gentle Elisha, the successor of Elijah. It reached far beyond the time then present, and was indeed a Messianic prophecy, declaring the inmost character of Him in whom 'the Lord is,' in an altogether special sense. Elijah as a prophet brought no new knowledge, and uttered no far-reaching predictions; but he received one of the deepest and clearest prophecies of the gentleness of God's highest Messenger, and on Horeb saw afar off what he saw fulfilled on the Mountain of Transfiguration. Nor is his vision exhausted by its Messianic reference. It contains an eternal truth for all God's servants. Storm, earthquake, and fire may be God's precursors, and needed sometimes to prepare His way; but gentleness is 'the habitation of His throne,' and they serve Him best, and are nearest Him whom they serve, who are meek in heart and gentle among enemies, 'as a nurse cherisheth her children.' Love is the victor, and the sharpest weapons of the Christian are love and lowliness.

The lesson was not at first grasped by Elijah, as his repetition of his complaint, word for word, with almost dogged obstinacy, shows. The best of us are slow to learn God's lessons, and a habit of faithless gloom is not soon overcome. It is much easier to get down into the pit than to struggle out of it.

III. The commission for further service, which closes

the scene, is a further rebuke to the prophet. He is bidden to retrace his way and to take refuge in the desert lying to the south and east of Damascus, where he would be safe from Jezebel, and still not far from the scene of his activity. The instructions given to anoint a king of Syria and one of Israel were not fulfilled by Elijah, but by his successor; and we have to suppose that further commands were given to him on that subject. The third injunction, to anoint his successor, was obeyed at once on his journey, though Abelmeholah, on Gilboa, was dangerously near Jezreel. The designation of these future instruments of God's purpose was at once a sign to Elijah that his own task was drawing to a close (having reached its climax on Carmel), and that God had great designs beyond him and his service. The true conception of our work is that we are only links in a chain, and that we can be done without. 'God removes the workers and carries on the work.' To anoint our successor is often a bitter pill; but self-importance needs to be taken down, and it is blessed to lose ourselves in gazing into the future of God's work, when we are gone from the field.

Further, the commissions met Elijah's despondency in another way; for they assured him of the divine judgments on the house of Ahab, and of the use of the Syrian king as a rod to chastise Israel. He had thought God too slow in avenging His dishonoured name, and had been taught the might of gentleness; but now he also learns the certainty of punishment, while the enigmatical promise that Elisna should 'slay' those who escaped the swords of Hazael and Jehu dimly points to the merciful energy of that prophet's word, his only sword, which shall slay but to revive, and wound to heal 'I have hewed them by the . . . words of my mouth.'

Finally, the revelation of the seven thousand—a round number, which expresses the sacredness as well as the numerousness of the elect, hidden ones—rebukes the hasty assumption of his being left alone, ‘faithful among the faithless.’ God has more servants than we know of. Let us beware of feeding either our self-righteousness or our narrowness or our faint-heartedness with the fancy that we have a monopoly of faithfulness, or are left alone to witness for God.

PUTTING ON THE ARMOUR

And the king of Israel answered and said, Tell him, Let not him that girdeth on his harness boast himself as he that putteth it off.—1 KINGS XX. 11.

For the Young.

AHAB, King of Israel, was but a poor creature, and, like most weak characters, he turned out a wicked one, because he found that there were more temptations to do wrong than inducements to do right. Like other weak people, too, he was torn asunder by the influence of stronger wills. On the one side he had a termagant of a wife, stirring him up to idolatry and all evil, and on the other side Elijah thundering and lightning at him; so the poor man was often reduced to perplexity. Once in his lifetime he did behave like a king, with some flash of dignity. My text comes from that incident. His next neighbour, and, consequently, his continual enemy, was the king of Damascus. He had made a raid across the border and was dictating terms so severe as to invite even Ahab to courageous opposition. His back was at the wall, and he mustered up courage to say ‘No!’ That provoked a bit of blustering bravado from the enemy, who sent back a message, ‘The gods do also unto me, and more also, if the dust of

Samaria shall suffice for handfuls for all the people that follow me.' And then Ahab replied in the words of our text. They have a dash of contempt and sarcasm, all the more galling because of their unanswerable common-sense. 'The time to crow and clap your wings is *after* you have fought. Samaria is not a heap of dust just yet. Threatened men live long.' The battle began, and the bully was beaten; and for once Ahab tasted the sweets of success.

Now, I have nothing more to do with Ahab and the immediate application of his message, but I wish to apply it to my young friends, whom I have taken it upon me to ask now to listen to two or three homely words to them in this sermon.

You are beginning the fight; some of us old people are getting very near the end of it. And I would fain, if I could, see successors coming to take the places which we shall soon have to vacate. So my message to you, dear friends, young men and young women, is this, 'Let not him that putteth on the harness boast himself as he that putteth it off.'

I. Now, look for a moment at the general view of life that is implied in this saying thus understood.

There is nothing that the bulk of people are more unwilling to do than steadily to think about what life as a whole, and in its deepest aspects, is. And that disinclination is strong, as I suppose, in the average young man or young woman. That comes, plainly enough, from the very blessings of your stage of life. Unworn health, a blessed inexperience of failures and limitations, the sense of undeveloped power within you, the natural buoyancy of early days, all tend to make you rather live by impulse than by reflection. And I should be the last man in the world to try to

damp the noble, buoyant, beautiful enthusiasms with which Nature has provided that we should all begin our course. The world will do that soon enough; and there is no sadder sight than that of a bitter old man, who has outlived, and smiles sardonically at, his youthful dreams. But I do wish to press upon you all this question, Have you ever tried to think to yourself, 'Now what, after all, is this life that is budding within me and dawning before me—what is it, in its deepest reality, and what am I to do with it?'

There are some of us to whom, so far as we have thought at all, life presents itself mainly as a shop, a place where we are to 'buy and sell, and get gain,' and use our evenings, after the day's work is over, for such recreation as suits us. And there are young men among my hearers who, with the flush of their physical manhood upon them, and perhaps away from the restraints of home, and living in gloomy town lodgings, with no one to look after them, are beginning to think that life after all is a kind of pigs' trough, with plenty of foul wash in it for whoso chooses to suck it up—a garden of not altogether pure delights, a place where a man may gratify the 'lusts of the flesh.'

But, dear brethren, whilst there are many other noble metaphors under which we can set forth the essential character of this mysterious, tremendous life of ours, I do not know that there is one that ought to appeal more to the slumbering heroism which lies in every human soul, and to the enthusiasms which, unless you in your youth cherish, you will in your manhood be beggared indeed, than that which this picture of my text suggests. After all, life is meant to be one long conflict. We are like the fellahin that one sometimes sees in Eastern lands, who cannot go out to plough in

their fields, or reap their harvests, without a gun slung on their backs; for the condition under which we work in this world is that everything worth doing has to be done at the cost of opposition and antagonism, and that no noble service or building is possible without brave, continuous conflict. Even upon the lower levels of life that is so. No man learns a science or a trade without having to fight for it. But high above these lower levels, there is the one on which we all are called to walk, the high level of duty, and no man does what his conscience tells him, or refrains from that which his conscience sternly forbids, without having to fight for it. We are in the lists and compelled to draw the sword. And if we do not realise this, that all nobility, all greatness, all wisdom, all success, even of the lowest and most vulpine kind, are won by conflict, we shall never do anything in the world worth doing. You are a soldier, whether you will or no, and life is a fight, whether you recognise the fact or not.

So, standing at the beginning, do not fancy that there is opening before you a scene of enjoyment, or that you are stepping into a world in which you can take your ease, and come out successfully at the other end. It is not so; and you will find that out before long. Better that you should settle it in your minds at first. When you were born you were enrolled on the roll-call of the regiment; and now you have to do a man's part in the battle.

II. Note the boastful temper which is sure to be beaten.

No doubt there is something inspiring in the spectacle of the young warrior standing there, chafing at the lists, eagerly pulling on his gauntlets, sitting on his helmet, and longing to be in the thick of the fight. No

doubt, as I have already said, there is something in your early days which makes such buoyant hopes and anticipations of success natural, and which gives you, as a great gift, that expectation of victory. I do not wish to shatter any of your enthusiasms or ideals, but I do wish to suggest a consideration or two that may calm and sober them.

So I ask, have you ever estimated, are you now estimating rightly, what it is that you have to fight for? To make yourselves pure, wise, strong, self-governing, Christlike men, such as God would have you to be. That is not a small thing for a man to set himself to do. You may go into the struggle for lower purposes, for bread and cheese, or wealth or fame, or love, or the like, with a comparatively light heart; but if there once has dawned upon a young soul the whole majestic sweep of possibilities in its opening life, then the battle assumes an aspect of solemnity and greatness that silences all boasting. Have you considered what it is that you have to fight for?

Have you considered the forces that are arrayed against you? 'What act is all its thought had been?' Hand and brain are never paired. There is always a gap between the conception and its realisation. The painter stands before his canvas, and, while others may see beauty in it, he only sees what a small fragment of the radiant vision that floated before his eye his hand has been able to preserve. The author looks on his book and thinks what a poor, wretched transcript of the thoughts that inspired his pen it is. There is ever this same disproportion between the conception and accomplishment. Therefore, all we old people feel, more or less, that our lives have been failures. We set out as you do, thinking that we were going to build a tower

whose top should reach to heaven, and we are contented if, at the last, we have scrambled together some little wooden shanty in which we can live. We thought as you do; you will come to think as we do. So you had better begin now, and not go into the fight boasting, or you will come out of it conscious of being beaten.

Have you realised how different it is to dream things and to do them? In our dreams we are, as it were, working in *vacuo*. When we come to acts, the atmosphere offers resistance. It is easy to imagine ourselves victorious in circumstances where things are all going rightly and are bending according to our own desires, but when we come to the grim world, where there are things that resist and people are not plastic, it is a very different matter. You do not yet understand, as you will some day, the fatal limitations of power that hem us all round and the obstinate way that circumstances have of not falling in with our wishes. And you have not yet learned how completely and constantly failure accompanies success, like its shadow. The old Egyptians had no need to put a skeleton at their tables, nor the Romans to set a mocker behind the hero as he rode in triumph up to the Capitol. The world provides the skeleton at the banquet, and circumstances supply the mocker to add a dash of failure to all our triumphs.

Have you ever realised how certainly, into the brightest and most buoyant and successful lives, there will come crushing sorrows, blows as from an unseen hand in the dark, that fell a man? O friend! when one thinks of the miseries and the misfortunes, the sorrows and the losses, the broken and bleeding hearts that began life buoyant, elastic, hopeful, perhaps boasting, like you, there ought to be a sobering tint cast over our brightest visions.

I suppose that our colleges are full of students who are going to far outstrip their professors, that every life-school has a dozen lads who have just begun to handle brush and easel, and are going to put Raffaele in the shade. I suppose that every lawyer's office has a budding Lord Chancellor or two in it. And I suppose that that sharp criticism of us fumlbers in the field, and half-expressed thought, 'How much better I could do it!' belong to youth by virtue of its youth. It is a crude form of undeveloped power, but it wants a great deal of sobering down, and I am trying now to let out a little of the blood, and to bring you to a clear conception of the very limited success which is likely to attend you. All we old people, whose deficiencies and limitations you see so clearly, had the same dreams, impossible as it may appear to you, fifty years ago. We were going to be the men, and wisdom was going to die with us, and you see what we have made of it. You will not do much better.

Have you ever taken stock honestly of your own resources? 'What king, going to make war against another king, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether with his ten thousand he can meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand?' Boast if you like, but calculate first, and boast after that, if you can.

Your worst enemy is yourself. When you are counting your resources and saying, 'I have this, that, and the other thing,' do not forget to say, 'I have a part of me, that takes all the rest of me all its time to keep it down and prevent it from becoming master.' You have traitors in the fortress who are in communication with the enemy outside, and may go over to him openly in the very crisis of the fight. You have to take that fact

into account, and it ought to suppress boasting whilst you are putting on the harness.

You are not old enough to remember, as some of us do, the delirious enthusiasm with which, in the last Franco-German war, the Emperor and the troops left Paris, and how, as the train steamed out of the station, shouts were raised, 'À Berlin!' Ay! and they never got farther than Sedan, and there an Emperor and an army were captured. Go into the fight bragging, and you will come out of it beaten.

III. Note the confidence which is not boasting.

I can fancy some of you saying, 'These gloomy views of yours will lead to nothing but absolute despair. You have been telling us that success is impossible; that we are bound to fight, and are sure to be beaten. What are we to do? Throw up the sponge, and say, "Very well! then I may as well have my fling, and give up all attempts to be any better than my passions and my senses would lead me to be."' And if there is nothing more to be said about the fight than has been already said, that is the conclusion. 'Let us eat and drink,' not only 'for to-morrow we die,' but 'for to-day we are sure to be beaten.' But I have only been speaking about this self-distrust as preliminary to what is the main thing that I desire to urge upon you now, and it is this: You do not need to be beaten. There is no room for boasting, but there is room for absolute confidence. You, young men and women, standing at the entrance of the amphitheatre where the gladiators fight, may dash into the arena with the most perfect confidence that you will come out with your shield preserved and your sword unbroken.

There is one way of doing it. 'Be of good cheer! I have overcome the world.' That was not the boast of

a man putting on the harness, but the calm utterance of the conquering Christ when He was putting it off. He has conquered that you may conquer. Remember how the Apostle, who has preserved for us that note of triumph at the end of Christ's life, has, like some musician with a favourite phrase, modulated and varied it in his letter written long after, when he says, 'This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.' My dear young friends, distrust yourselves utterly, and trust Jesus Christ absolutely, and give yourselves to Him, to be His servants and soldiers till your lives' end. Then you will not be beaten, for it is written of those who move in the light, wearing the victor's palm: 'These are they who overcame by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of His testimony.' That blood secures our victory in a threefold fashion. By that great death of Jesus Christ all our past sins may be forgiven, and they no longer have power to tyrannise over us. In His sacrifice for us there are motives given to us for noble, grateful, Godlike living, stronger than all the temptations that can arise from our own hearts, or from the evils around us. And if we put our humble trust in Him, then that faith opens the door for the entrance into our hearts, in simple reality, of a share in His conquering life which will make us victorious over the world, the flesh, and the devil.

'This is the victory that overcometh the world,' and the youngest, feeblest Christian who lays his or her hand in Christ's strong hand, may look out upon all the embattled antagonisms that front them, and say, 'He will cover my head in the day of battle, and teach my hands to war and my fingers to fight.'

Dear young friends, people sometimes preach to you that you should be Christians, because life is uncertain

and death is drawing near, and after death the judgment. I preach that too; but the gospel that I seek to press upon you now is not merely a thing to die by, but it is *the* thing to live by; and it is the only power by which we shall be sure of overcoming the armies of the aliens. This confidence in Christ will take away from you no shred of your natural, youthful, buoyant elasticity, but it will save you from much transgression and from bitter regrets.

One last word. There is possible a triumph which is not boasting, for him who puts off the harness. The war-worn soldier has little heart for boasting, but he may be able to say, 'I have not been beaten.' The best of us, when we come to the end, will have to recognise in retrospect failures, deficiencies, palterings with evil, yieldings to temptation, sins of many sorts, that will put all boasting out of our thoughts. But, whilst that is so, there is sometimes granted to the man, who has been faithful in his adherence to Jesus Christ, a gleam of sunshine at eventime, which foretells Heaven's welcome and 'Well done!', before it is uttered. He was no self-righteous braggart, but a very rigid judge of himself, who, close by the headsman's block that ended his life, said: 'I have fought a good fight; I have finished my course; I have kept the faith.' 'Put on the whole armour of God,' and when the time comes to put it off, you will have a peaceful assurance as far removed from despair as it is from boasting. Distrust yourselves; do not underestimate your enemies; understand that life is warfare; trust utterly to Jesus Christ, and He will see to it that you are not conquered, will give you the calm confidence of which we have been speaking here, and a share hereafter in the throne which He promises to him that overcometh. If you

will trust yourselves to Him, and take service in His army, you cannot be too certain of victory. If you fling yourself into the battle in your own strength, with however high a hope, and fight without the Captain for your ally, you cannot escape defeat.

ROYAL MURDERERS

'And it came to pass after these things, that Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard, which was in Jezreel, hard by the palace of Ahab king of Samaria. 2. And Ahab spake unto Naboth, saying, Give me thy vineyard, that I may have it for a garden of herbs, because it is near unto my house: and I will give thee for it a better vineyard than it; or, if it seem good to thee, I will give thee the worth of it in money. 3. And Naboth said to Ahab, The Lord forbid it me, that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee. 4. And Ahab came into his house heavy and displeased because of the word which Naboth the Jezreelite had spoken to him: for he had said, I will not give thee the inheritance of my fathers. And he laid him down upon his bed, and turned away his face, and would eat no bread. 5. But Jezebel his wife came to him, and said unto him, Why is thy spirit so sad, that thou eatest no bread? 6. And he said unto her, Because I spake unto Naboth the Jezreelite, and said unto him, Give me thy vineyard for money: or else, if it please thee, I will give thee another vineyard for it: and he answered, I will not give thee my vineyard. 7. And Jezebel his wife said unto him, Dost thou now govern the kingdom of Israel? arise, and eat bread, and let thine heart be merry: I will give thee the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite. 8. So she wrote letters in Ahab's name, and sealed them with his seal, and sent the letters unto the elders and to the nobles that were in his city, dwelling with Naboth. 9. And she wrote in the letters, saying, Proclaim a fast, and set Naboth on high among the people: 10. And set two men, sons of Belial, before him, to bear witness against him, saying, Thou didst blaspheme God and the king. And then carry him out, and stone him, that he may die. 11. And the men of his city, even the elders and the nobles who were the inhabitants in his city, did as Jezebel had sent unto them, and as it was written in the letters which she had sent unto them. 12. They proclaimed a fast, and set Naboth on high among the people. 13. And there came in two men, children of Belial, and sat before him: and the men of Belial witnessed against him, even against Naboth, in the presence of the people, saying, Naboth did blaspheme God and the king. Then they carried him forth out of the city, and stoned him with stones, that he died. 14. Then they sent to Jezebel, saying, Naboth is stoned, and is dead. 15. And it came to pass, when Jezebel heard that Naboth was stoned, and was dead, that Jezebel said to Ahab, Arise, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give thee for money; for Naboth is not alive, but dead. 16. And it came to pass, when Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, that Ahab rose up to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it.'—1 KINGS xxi. 1-16.

THERE are three types of character in this story, all bad, but in different ways. Ahab is wicked and weak; Jezebel, wicked and strong; the elders of Jezreel, wicked and subservient. Amongst them they commit

a great crime, which was the last drop in the full cup of the king's sins, and brought down God's judgment on him and his house.

I. We have to look at the weakly wicked Ahab. His wish for Naboth's vineyard was a mere selfish whim. He was willing to give more for it than it was worth. It suited his convenience for a kitchen-garden. In the true spirit of an Eastern despot, he expected everything to yield to his caprice, and did not think that a subject had any rights. What business has a poor man with sentiment? Naboth is to go, and a handful of silver will set all right. Samuel's warning of what a king would be and do was fulfilled. This high-handed interference with private rights was what Israel's revolt had led to. The sturdy Naboth was influenced not only by love for the bit of land which his fathers had cultivated for more years than Ahab had reigned days, but by obedience to the law of God; and he was not afraid to show himself a Jehovah worshipper, by his solemn appeal to 'the Lord,' as well as by the fact of his refusal. The brusque, flat refusal shows that some independence was left in the nation.

The weak rage and childish sulking of Ahab are very characteristic of a feeble and selfish nature, accustomed to be humoured and not thwarted. These fits of temper seem to have been common with him; for he was in one at the end of the preceding chapter, as he is now. The 'bed' on which he flung himself is probably the couch for reclining on at table, and, if so, the picture of his passion is still more vivid. Instead of partaking of the meal, he turns his face to the wall, and refuses food. 'No meat will down with him for want of a salad, because wanting Naboth's vineyard for a garden of herba.' As he lies there, like a spoiled child, all

because he could not get his own way, he may serve for an example of the misery of unbridled selfishness and unregulated desires. An acre or two of land was a small matter to get into such a state about, and there are few things that are worth a wise or a strong man's being so troubled. Hezekiah might 'turn his face to the wall' in the extremity of sickness and earnestness of prayer; but Ahab in doing it is only a poor, feeble creature who has weakly set his heart on what is not his, and weakly whimpers because he cannot have it.

To be thus at the mercy of our own ravenous desires, and so utterly miserable when they are thwarted, is unworthy of manhood, and is sure to bring many a bitter moment; for there are more disappointments than gratifications in store for such a one. We may learn from Ahab, too, the certainty that weakness will darken into wickedness. Such a mood as his always brings some Jezebel or other to suggest evil ways of succeeding. In this wicked world there are more temptations to sin than helps to virtue, and the weak man will soon fall into some of the abundant traps laid for him. Unless we have learned to say 'No' with much emphasis, because we are 'strong in the Lord,' we shall fall. 'This did not I because of the fear of the Lord.' To be weak is to be miserable, and any sin may come from it.

II. Jezebel is a type of a different sort of wickedness. She is wicked and strong. Notice how she takes the upper hand at once, in her abrupt question, not without a spice of scorn; and note how Ahab answers, bemoaning himself, putting in the forefront his fair proposal, and making Naboth's refusal ruder than it really had been, by suppressing its reason. Then out flashes the imperious will of this masterful princess,

who had come from a land where royalty was all-powerful, and who had no restraints of conscience. She darts a half-contemptuous question at Ahab, to stir him to action; for nothing moves a weak man so much as the fear of being thought weak. 'Dost thou govern?' implies, 'If thou dost, thou mayest trample on a subject.' It should mean, 'If thou dost, thou must jealously guard the subject's rights.' What a proud consciousness of her power speaks in that 'I will give thee the vineyard'! It is like Lady Macbeth's 'Give me the dagger!' No more is said. She can keep her own counsel, and Ahab suspects that some violence is to be used, which he had better not know. So, again, his weakness leads him astray. He does not wish to hear what he is willing should be done, if only he has not to do it. So feeble men hoodwink conscience by conniving at evils which they dare not perpetrate, and then enjoying their fruits, and saying, 'Thou canst not say I did it.'

Jezebel had Ahab's signet, the badge of authority, which she probably got from him for her unspoken purpose. Her letter to the elders of Jezreel speaks out, with cynical disregard of decency, the whole ugly conspiracy. It is direct, horribly plain, and imperative. There is a perfect nest of sins hissing and coiled together in it. Hypocrisy calling religion in to attest a lie, subornation of evidence, contempt for the poor tools who are to perjure themselves, consciousness that such work will only be done by worthless men, cool lying, ferocity, and murder,—these are a pretty company to crowd into half a dozen lines. Most detestable of all is the plain speaking which shows her hardened audacity and conscious defiance of all right. To name sin by its true name, and then to do it without a quiver,

is a depth of evil reached by few men, and perhaps fewer women.

The plot gives a colour of legality, which is probably often unobserved by readers. Naboth was to be accused of treason: 'renouncing God and the king'; and that was, according to the law of Moses, a charge which, if proved, merited capital punishment. But it is Satan accusing sin for Jezebel, the Baal worshipper, who had done her best to root out the name of Jehovah, to accuse Naboth of departing from God. Much high-handed oppression must have gone before such outspoken contempt of justice; and, if Ahab represents the fatal connection of weakness and wickedness, Jezebel is an instance of the fatal audacity with which a strong character may come, by long indulgence in self-willed gratification of its own desires, to trample down all obstacles and go crashing through all laws, human and divine. The climax of sin is to see a deed to be sinful, and to do it all the same. Such a pre-eminence in evil is not reached at a bound, but it can be reached; and every indulgence in passion, and every gratifying of desire against which conscience protests, is a step toward it. Therefore, if we shrink from such a goal, let us turn away from the paths that lead to it. 'No mortal man is supremely foul all at once.' Therefore resist the beginnings of evil. Elijah was strong by natural temperament, and so was Jezebel. But the strength of the prophet was hallowed by obedience, and, like some great river, poured blessings where it flowed. Jezebel's strength was lawless, and foamed itself away in fury, like some devastating torrent that spreads ruin whithersoever it bursts out. 'Be strong' is good advice, but it needs the supplement, 'Let all your deeds be done in charity,' and the founda-

tion, 'Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might.'

III. The last set of actors in this pitiful tragedy are the subserviently wicked elders. The narrative sets their slavish compliance in a strong light. It puts emphasis on the tie between them and Naboth, in that they 'dwelt in his city,' and so should have had neighbourly feeling. It lays stress on their cowardly motive and their complete execution of orders, both by reiterating that they acted 'as Jezebel had sent' and 'as it was written,' and by taking the letter clause by clause, in the narrative of the shameful parody of justice which they acted. It suggests both their eagerness to do her pleasure, and her impatient waiting, in her palace, by the message sent in hot haste as soon as the brave peasant proprietor was dead. 'It is ill sitting at Rome and striving with the Pope,' as the proverb has it. No doubt these cowards were afraid for their own necks, and were too near the royal tigress to venture disobedience. But their swift, unremonstrating, and complete obedience indicates the depth of degradation and corruption to which they and the nation had sunk, and the terror exercised by their upstart king and his Sidonian wife.

Cowardice is always contemptible, and wickedness is always odious; but when the two come together, and a man has no other reason for his sin than 'I was afraid,' each makes the other blacker. Israel had cast off the fear of the Lord, which would have preserved it from the ignoble terror of men, and the consequence was that it trembled before an angry, unscrupulous woman. It had revolted from Rehoboam and his foolish bluster about whips and scorpions, and the consequence was a worse slavery. If we fear God, we

need have no other fear. The sun puts out a fire. If we rebel against Him, we do not become free, but fall under a heavy yoke. It is never prudent to do wrong. The worst consequences of resistance to powerful evil are easier to bear than those of compliance, though it may seem the safer. Better be lying dead beneath a heap of stones, like the sturdy Naboth, who could say 'No' to a king, than be one of his stoners, who killed their innocent neighbour to pleasure Jezebel!

Her indecent triumph at the success of the plot, and her utter callousness, are expressed in her words to Ahab, in which the main point is the taking possession of the vineyard. The death of its owner is told with exultation, as being nothing but the sweeping aside of an obstacle. Ahab asks no questions as to how this opportune clearing away of hindrance came about. He knew, no doubt, well enough that there had been foul play; but that does not matter to him, and such a trifle as murder does not slacken his glad haste to get his new toy. There was other red on the vines than their clustering grapes, as he soon found out, when Elijah's grim figure, like an embodied conscience, met him there. Whoever reaches out to grasp a fancied good by breaking God's law, may get his good, but he will get more than he expected along with it,—even an accusing voice that prophesies evil. Elijah strides among the leafy vines in the field bought by crime. Ahab meant to make it a garden of pot-herbs. 'Surely the bitter wormwood of divine revenge grew abundantly therein.'

AHAB AND ELIJAH

'And Ahab said to Elijah, Hast thou found me, O mine enemy!'—1 KINGS xxi. 20.

THE keynote of Elijah's character is force—the force of righteousness. The New Testament, you remember, speaks of the 'power of Elias.' The outward appearance of the man corresponds to his function and his character. Gaunt and sinewy, dwelling in the desert, feeding on locusts and wild honey, with a girdle of camel's skin about his loins, he bursts into the history, amongst all that corrupt state of society, with the force of a hammer that God's hand wields. The whole of his career is marked by this one thing,—the strength of a righteous man. And then, on the other hand, this Ahab;—the keynote of *his* character is the weakness of wickedness, and the wickedness of weakness. Think of him. Weakly longing—as idle and weak minds in lofty places always do—after something that belongs to somebody else; with all his gardens, coveting the one little herb-plot of the poor Naboth; weak and worse than womanly, turning his face to the wall and weeping when he cannot get it; weakly desiring to have it, and yet not knowing how to set about accomplishing his wish; and then—as is always the case, for there are always tempters everywhere for weak people—that beautiful fiend by his side, like the other queen in our great drama, ready to screw the feeble man that she is wedded to, to the sticking-place, and to dare anything to grasp that on which the heart was set. And so the deed is done: Naboth safe stoned out of the way; and Ahab goes down to take possession! The lesson of that is, my friend,—Weak dallying with forbidden desires is sure to end in wicked clutch-

ing at them. Young men, take care! You stand upon the beetling edge of a great precipice, when you look over, from your fancied security, at a wrong thing; and to strain too far, and to look too fixedly, leads to a perilous danger of toppling over and being lost! If you know that a thing cannot be won without transgression, do not tamper with hankerings for it. Keep away from the edge, and ‘*shut* your eyes from beholding vanity.’

But my business now is rather with the consequences of this apparently successful sin, than with what went before it. The king gets the crime done, shuffles it off himself on to the shoulders of his ready tools in the little village, goes down to get his toy, and gets it—but he gets Elijah along with it, which was more than he reckoned on. When, all full of impatience and hot haste to solace himself with his new possession, he rushes down to seize the vineyard, he finds there, standing at the gate, waiting for him—black-browed, motionless, grim, an incarnate conscience—the prophet whom he had not seen for years, the prophet that he had last seen on Carmel, bearding alone the servants of Baal, and executing on them the solemn judgment of death; and there leaps at once to his lip, ‘Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?’

I. I find here, in the first place, this broad principle: Pleasure won by sin is peace lost.

It does not need that there should be a rebuking prophet standing by to work out that law. God commits the execution of it to the natural operations of our own consciences and our own spirits. Here is the fact in men’s natures on which it partly depends: when sin is yet tempting us, it is loved; when sin is done, it is loathed. Action and

reaction, as the mechanicians tell us, are equal and contrary. The more violent the blow with which we strike upon the forbidden pleasure, the further back the rebound after the stroke. When sin tempts—when there hangs glittering before a man the golden fruit which he knows that he ought not to touch—then, amidst the noise of passion or the sophistry of desire, conscience is silenced for a little while. No man sins without knowing that it is wrong, without knowing that in the long run it is a mistake; but at the instant, in the delirium of yielding, as in moments of high physical excitement, he is blind and deaf, deaf to the voice of reason, blind to the sight of consequences. Conscience and consequence are alike lost sight of. Like a mad bull, the man that is tempted lowers his head and shuts his eyes, and rushes right on. The moment that the sin is done, that moment the passion or desire which tempted to it is satiated, and ceases to exist for the time. It is gone as a motive. Like some savage beast, being fed full, it lies down to sleep. There is a vacuum left in the heart, the noise is stilled, and then—and then—conscience begins to speak. Or, to take another image, the passion, the desires, the impulses that lead us to do wrong things—they are like a crew that mutiny, and take for a moment the wheel from the steersman and the command from the captain, but then, having driven the ship on the rocks, the mutineers get intoxicated, and lie down and sleep. Passion fulfils itself, and expires. The desire is satisfied, and it turns into a loathing. The tempter draws us to him, and then unveils the horrid face that lies beneath the mask. When the deed is done and cannot be undone, then comes satiety; then comes the re-
tion of the fierce excitement, the hot blood begins

to flow more slowly; then rises up in the heart conscience; then rises up in majesty in the soul reason; then flashes and flares before the eye the vivid picture of the consequences. His 'enemy' has found the sinner. He has got the vineyard—ay, but Elijah is there, and his dark and stern presence sucks all the brightness and the sunniness out of the landscape; and Naboth's blood stains the leaves of Naboth's garden! There is no sin which is not the purchase of pleasure at the price of peace.

Now, you will say that all that is true in regard to the grosser forms of transgression, but that it is not true in regard to the less vulgar and sensual kinds of crime. Of course it is most markedly observable with regard to the coarsest kind of sins; but it is as true, though perhaps not in the same degree—*not* in the same prominent, manifest way at any rate—in regard to every sin that a man does. There is never an evil thing which—knowing it to be evil—we commit, which does not rise up to testify against us. As surely as (in the words of our great philosopher poet) 'lust dwells hard by hate,' and as surely as to-night's debauch is followed by to-morrow's headache, so surely—each after its kind, and each in its own region—every sin lodges in the human heart the seed of a quick-springing punishment, yea, is its own punishment. When we come to grasp the sweet thing that we have been tempted to seize, there is a serpent that starts up amongst all the flowers. When the evil act is done—opposite of the prophet's roll—it is sweet in the lips, but oh! it is bitter afterwards. 'At the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder!'

Then, you may say again, 'All that is very much exaggerated. That is not the sort of feeling which

men that go on persistently doing wrong things, cherish. They live quietly and contentedly enough. "There are no bands in their death, and their strength is firm." All that would be true if men's consciences kept sensitive in the midst of men's sins, but they do not; and so it cannot be that every transgression has thus its quick result in loss of peace. I grant you at once that it is quite possible for men to sin away the delicacy and susceptibility of their consciences. I dare say there are people here now who, after they have done a wrong thing, go on very quietly, with no knowledge of those agonies that I have been speaking about, with scarcely ever a prick of conscience for their sin. But what then? I did not say that all sin purchased pleasure by inflictions of agony; but I do say, that all sin purchases pleasure by loss of peace. The silence of a seared conscience is not peace. For peace you want something more than that a conscience shall be dumb. For peace you want something more than that you shall be able to live without the daily sense and sting of sin. You want not only the negative absence of pain, but the positive presence of a tranquillising guest in your heart—that conscience of yours testifying with you, blessing you in its witness, and shedding abroad rest and comfort. It is easy to kill a conscience—after a fashion at least. It is easy to stifle it. It is easy to come to that depth of wrongdoing that one gets used to it, and does it without caring. But oh! that cold vacuum, that dead absence in such a spirit of all healthy self-communing, that painful suspicion, 'If I look into myself, and be quiet for a little while, and take stock of my own character, and see what I am, the balance will be on the wrong side,'—that is *not* peace. As the old historian says about

the Roman armies that marched through a country, burning and destroying every living thing, 'They make a solitude, and they call it peace.' And so men do with their consciences. They stifle them, sear them, forcibly silence them, somehow or other; and then, when there is a dead stillness in the heart, broken by no voice of either approbation or blame, but doleful like the unnatural quiet of a deserted city, then they call that peace, and the man's uncontrolled passions and unbridled desires dwell solitary in the fortress of his own spirit! You *may* almost attain to that. Do you think it is a goal to be set before you as an ideal of human nature? The loss of peace is certain—the presence of agony is most likely—from every act of sin.

And so, it is not only a *crime* that men commit when they do wrong, but it is a *blunder*. Sin is not only guilt, but it is a mistake. 'The game is not worth the candle,' according to the French proverb. The thing that you buy is not worth the price you pay for it. Sin is like a great forest-tree that we may sometimes see standing up green in its leafy beauty, and spreading a broad shadow over half a field; but when we get round on the other side, there is a great dark hollow in the very heart of it, and corruption is at work there. It is like the poison-tree in travellers' stories, tempting weary men to rest beneath its thick foliage, and insinuating death into the limbs that relax in the fatal coolness of its shade. It is like the apples of Sodom, fair to look upon, but turning to acrid ashes on the unwary lips. It is like the magician's rod that we read about in old books. There it lies; and if, tempted by its glitter, or fascinated by the power that it proffers you, you take it in your hand, the thing starts into

a serpent with erected crest and sparkling eye, and plunges its quick barb into the hand that holds it, and sends poison through all the veins. Do not touch it, my brother! Every sin buys pleasure at the price of peace. Elijah is always waiting at the gate of the ill-gotten possession.

II. In the second place, Sin is blind to its true friends and its real foes.

'Hast thou found me, *O mine enemy?*' Elijah was the best friend that Ahab had in his kingdom. And that Jezebel there, the wife of his bosom, whom he loved and thanked for this new toy, she was the worst foe that hell could have sent him. Ay, and so it is always. The faithful rebuker, the merciful inflicter of pain, is the truest friend of the wrongdoer. The worst enemy of the sinful heart is the voice that either tempts it into sin, or lulls it into self-complacency. And this is one of the most certain workings of evil desires in our spirits, that they pervert for us all the relations of things, that they make us blind to all the moral truths of God's universe. Sin is blind as to itself, blind as to its own consequences, blind as to who are its friends and who are its foes, blind as to earth, blind as to another world, blind as to God. The man who walks in the 'vain show' of transgression, whose heart is set upon evil,—he fancies that ashes are bread, and stones gold (as in the old fairy story); and, on the other hand, he thinks that the true sweet is the bitter, and turns away from God's angels and God's prophets, with, 'Hast thou found me, *O mine enemy?*' That is the reason, my friend, of not a little of the infidelity that haunts this world—that sin, perverted and blinded, stumbles about in its darkness, and mistakes the face of the

friend for the face of the foe. God sends you in mercy a conscience to prick and sting you that you may be kept right; and you think that *it* is your enemy. God sends in His mercy the discipline of life, pains and sorrows, to draw us away from the wrong, to make us believe that the right in this world and the next is life, and that holiness is happiness for evermore. And then, when, having done wrong, God's merciful messenger of a sharp sorrow finds us out, we say, 'Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?' and begin to wonder about the mysteries of Providence, and how it comes that there is evil in the creation of a good God. Why, physical evil is the best friend of the man that is subject to moral evil. Sorrow is the truest blessing to a sinner. The best thing that can befall any of us is that God shall not let us alone in any wrong course, without making us feel His rod, without hedging up our way with thorns, and sending us by His grace into a better one. There is no mystery in sorrow. There is a mystery in sin; but sorrow following on the back of sin is the true friend, and not the enemy, of the wrong-doing spirit.

And then, again, God sends us a gospel full of dark words about evil. It deals with that fact of sin, as no other system ever did. There is no book like the Bible for these two things,—for the lofty notion that it has about what man may be and ought to be; and for the low notion that it has of what man is. It does not degrade human nature, because it tells us the truth about human nature as it is. Its darkest and bitterest sayings about transgression, they are veiled promises, my brother. It does not make the consequences of sin which it writes down. You and I make them for ourselves, and it tells us of them. Did the

lighthouse make the rock that it stands on? Is it to be blamed for the shipwreck? If a man *will* go full tilt against the thing that he knows will ruin him, what is the right name for him who hedges it up with a prickly fence of thorns, and puts a great light above it, and writes below, 'If thou comest here thou diest'? Is that the work of an enemy? And yet that is why people talk about the gloomy views of the gospel, about the narrow spirit of Christianity, about the harsh things that are here! The Bible did not make hell. The Bible did not make sin the parent of sorrow. The Bible did not make it certain that 'every transgression and disobedience' should reap its 'just recompense of reward.' We are the causes of their coming upon ourselves; and the Bible but proclaims the end to which the paths of sin must lead, and beseechingly calls to us all, 'Turn ye, turn ye! why will ye die?' And yet when it comes to you, how many of you turn away from it, and say, 'It is mine enemy'! How many shrink from its merciful knife, that cuts into all the wounds of the festering spirit! How many of you feel as if 'the truth that is in Jesus' was a hard and bitter truth; when all the while its very heart's blood is love, and the very secret of its message is the tenderest compassion, the most yearning sympathy, for every soul amongst us!

Ay, and more than that:—sin makes us fancy that God Himself is our enemy; and sin makes that thought of God that ought to be most blessed and most sweet to us, the terror of our souls. You have the power, my friend, by your own wrongdoing, of perverting the whole universe, and, worst of all, of distorting the image of the merciful Father, of the loving God. God loves. God is the Father. God watches over us. God

will not let us alone when we transgress. God in His love has appointed that sin shall breed sorrow. But *we*—we do wrong; and then, for God's Providence, and God's Gospel, and God's Son, and God Himself, there rises up in our hearts a hostile feeling, and we think that He is turned to be our enemy, and fights against us! But oh! He only fights against us that we may submit to, and love, Him. Will you, then, have it that God's highest mercy should be your greatest sorrow, that your truest friend should be your worst foe? You can make the choice. To you God and His truth are like that ark of His covenant which to Dagon and the Philistines was a curse, but to the house of Obededom was a blessing. He and His gospel are to you like that pillar that was darkness and trouble to the hosts of the Egyptians, but light by night to His children. To you, my brother, the gospel may be either 'the savour of life unto life, or the savour of death unto death!' If He comes to you with rebuke, and meets you when you are at the very door of your sin, and busy with your transgression,—usher Him in, and thank Him, and bless Him for words of threatening, for merciful severity, for conviction of sin;—because conviction of sin is the work of the Comforter; and all the threatenings and all the pains that follow and track, like swift hounds, the committer of evil, are sent by Him who loves too wisely not to punish transgression, and loves too well to punish without warning, and desires only when He punishes that we should turn from our evil way, and escape the condemnation. An enemy, or a friend,—*which* is God in His truth to you?

III. Lastly, the sin which mistakes the friendly appeal for an enemy, lays up for itself a terrible retribution.

Elijah comes to Jezreel and prophesies the fall of Ahab. The next peal, the next flash, fulfil the prediction. There, where he did the wrong, he suffered. In Jezreel, Ahab died. In Jezreel, Jezebel died. That plain was the battlefield for the subsequent discomfiture of Israel. Over and over again there encamped upon it the hosts of the spoilers. Over and over again its soil ran red with the blood of the children of Israel; and at last, in the destruction of the kingdom, Naboth was avenged and God's word fulfilled. The threatened evil was foretold that it might lead the king to repentance, and that thus it might never need to be more than a threat. But, though Ahab was partially penitent, and partially listened to the prophet's voice, yet for all that, he went on in his evil way. Therefore the merciful threatening becomes a stern prophecy, and is fulfilled to the very letter.

So, when God's message comes to us, friends, if we listen not to it, and turn not to its gentle rebuke, Oh! then we gather up for ourselves an awful futurity of judgment, when threatening will darken into punishment, and the voice that rebuked will swell into the voice of final condemnation. When a man fancies that God's prophet is his enemy, and dreams that his finding him out is a calamity and a loss, that man may be certain that something worse will find him out some day. His sins will find him out, and that is worse than the prophet's coming. My friend, picture to yourself this—a human spirit shut up, with the companionship of its forgotten and dead transgressions. There is a resurrection of acts as well as of bodies. Think what it will be for a man to sit surrounded by that ghastly company, the ghosts of his own sins!—and as each forgotten fault and buried badness comes, silent and

sheeted, into that awful society, and sits itself down there, think of him greeting each with the question, 'Thou too? What! are ye all here? Hast *thou* found me, O mine enemy?' and from each bloodless spectral lip there tolls out the answer, the knell of his life, 'I *have* found thee, because thou hast sold thyself to work evil in the sight of the Lord.' Ah, my friend! if that were all we had to say, it might well stiffen us into stony despair. Thank God—thank God! such an issue is not inevitable. Christ speaks to you. Christ is your *Friend*. He loves you, and He speaks to you now—speaks to you of your danger, but in order that you may never rush into it and be engulfed by it; speaks to you of your sin, but in order that you may say to Him, 'Take Thou it away, O merciful Lord'; speaks to you of justice, but in order that you may never sink beneath the weight of His stroke; speaks to you of love, in order that you may know, and fully know, the depth of His graciousness. When He says to you, 'I love thee; love thou Me: I have died for thee; trust Me, live *by* Me, and live *for* Me,' will you not say to Him, 'My Friend, my Brother, my Lord, and my God'?

UNPOSSESSED POSSESSIONS

'And the king of Israel said unto his servants, Know ye that Ramoth in Gilead is ours, and we be still, and take it not out of the hand of the king of Syria!'—1 KINGS xxii. 3.

THIS city of Ramoth in Gilead was an important fortified place on the eastern side of the Jordan, and had, many years before the date of our text, been captured by its northern neighbours in the kingdom of Syria. A treaty had subsequently been concluded and broken

a war followed thereafter, in which Ben-hadad, King of Syria, had bound himself to restore all his conquests. He had not observed that article of peace, and the people of Israel had not been strong enough to enforce it until the date of our text; but then, backed up by a powerful alliance with Jehoshaphat of Judah, they determined to make a dash to get back what was theirs, but whilst theirs was also not theirs.

Now, I have nothing more to do with Ahab and Jehoshaphat, but I wish to turn the words of my text, and the thoughts that may come from them, into a direction profitable to ourselves. 'Know ye that Ramoth in Gilead is ours?' and yet it had to be got out of the hands of the King of Syria.

I. What is ours and not ours.

Every Christian man has large tracts of unannexed territory, unattained possibilities, unenjoyed blessings, things that are his and yet not his. How much more of God you and I have a right to than we have the possession of! The ocean is ours, but only the little pailful that we carry away home to our own houses is of use to us. The whole of God is mine if I am Christ's, and a dribble of God is all that comes into the lives of most of us.

How much inward peace is ours? It is meant that there should never pass across a Christian's soul more than a ripple of agitation, which may indeed ruffle and curl the surface; but deep down there should be the tranquillity of the fathomless ocean, unbroken by any tempests, and yet not stagnant, because there is a vital current running through it, and every drop is being drawn upward to the surface and the sunlight. There may be a peace in our hearts deep as life; a tranquillity which may be superficially disturbed, but

is never thoroughly, and down in its depths, broken. And yet, let some little petty annoyance come into our daily life, and what a pucker we are in! Then we forget all about the still depths in which we ought to be living; and fears and hopes and loves and ambitions disturb our souls, just as they do the spirits of the men that do not profess to have any holdfast in God. The peace of God is ours; but, ah! in how sad a sense it is true that the peace of God is *not* ours!

What 'heights'—for Ramoth means 'high places'—what heights of consecration there are which are ours according to the divine purpose and according to the fulness of God's gift! It is meant, and it is possible, and well within the reach of every Christian soul, that he or she should live, day by day, in the continual and utter surrender of himself or herself to the will of God, and should say, 'I do the little I can do, and leave the rest with Thee'; and should say again, 'All is right that seems most wrong, If it be His sweet will.' But instead of this absolute submission and completeness and joyfulness of surrender of ourselves to Him, what do we find? Reluctance to obey, regret at providences, Self dominant or struggling hard against the partial domination of the will of God in our hearts. The mind which was in Jesus Christ, who was able to say, 'It is written of Me, lo! I come to do Thy will, O Lord!' is ours by virtue of our being Christians; but, alas! in practical realisation how sadly it is not ours!

What noble possibilities of service, what power in the world, are bestowed on Christ's people! 'All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth,' says He. 'And He breathed on them, and said, As My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you.' The divine gift to

the Christian community, and to the individuals that compose it—for there are no gifts given to the community, but to the individuals that make it up—is of fulness of power for all their work. And yet look how, all through the ages, the Church has been beaten by the corruption of the world; and how to-day many of us are standing, either utterly careless and callous about the diseases that we have the medicine to cure, or in desperation looking about for other healing for the social and moral condition of the community than that which is granted to us in Jesus Christ. ‘Know ye that Ramoth in Gilead is ours, and we be still, and take it not out of the hands of the King of Syria?’

There is ever so much in the world which belongs to our Master, and therefore belongs to us, and which the Church is bound to lay its hand upon and claim for its own and for its Lord’s. For remember, brethren, that all the gifts at which I have been glancing—and I might have largely increased the catalogue—all these spiritual endowments of peace, and safety, and purity, and joy, of religious elevation, and consecration, and power for service, and the like—are ours by a threefold title and charter. God’s purpose, which is nothing less for every one of us than that we should be ‘filled with all the fulness of God,’ and that He should ‘supply all our need, according to His riches in glory,’—that is the first of the parchments on which our title depends. And the second title-deed is Christ’s purchase; for the efficacy of His death and the power of His triumphant life have secured for all who trust Him the whole fulness of this divine gift. And the third of our claims and titles is the influence of that Holy Spirit whom Jesus Christ gives to every one of His children to dwell in him. There is in you, working in

you, if you have any faith in that Lord, a power that is capable of making you perfectly pure, perfectly blessed, strong with an immortal strength, and glad with a 'joy that is unspeakable and full of glory.'

Oh! then, let us think of the awful contrast between what is ours and what we have. It is ours by the divine intention, by the divine gift in its fulness and all-sufficiency, and yet think of the poor, partial realisation of it that has passed into our experience. Be sure that you have what you have, and that you make your own what God has made yours.

II. Then, let me suggest, again, how our text hints for us, not only the difference between possession and realisation, but also our strange contentment in imperfect possession.

Ahab's remonstrances with his servants, which make the starting-point of my remarks, seem to suggest that there were two reasons for their acquiescence in the domination of a foreign power on a bit of their soil. They had not realised that Ramoth was theirs, and they were too lazy and cowardly to go and take it. Ignorance of the fulness of the gift, and slothful timidity in daring everything in the effort to make it ours, explain a great deal of the present condition of Christian people.

Is not that condition of passive acquiescence in their small present attainments, and of careless indifference to the great stretch of the unattained, the characteristic of the mass of professing Christians? They have got a foothold on a new continent, and their possession of it is like the world's drawing of the map of Africa when we were children, which had a settlement dotted here and there along the coast, and all the broad regions of the interior were blank. The settlers

huddle together upon the fringe of barren sand by the salt water, and never dream of pressing forward into the heart of the land. And so, too, many of us are content with what we have got, a little bit of God, when we might have Him all; a settlement on the fringe and edge of the land, when we might traverse the whole length of it; and behold! it is all ours.

That unfamiliarity with the thought of unattained possibilities in the Christian life is a damning curse of thousands of people who call themselves Christians. They do not think, they never realise—and some of us are guilty in this respect—they never realise that it is possible for them to be all unlike what they are now, and that, instead of the miserable partial hallowing of their nature, and the poor, weak—I was going to say strength, but it is not worth calling strength, that they possess, they might be as the angels of God: ‘the weakest as David,’ and David as a very angel of heaven itself. Why is it, why is it, that there is this unfamiliarity?

And then, another reason for the woful disproportion between what we have and what we utilise is the love of ease, such as kept these Israelites from going up to Ramoth-Gilead. It was a long way off; there was a river to be forded; there were heights to be climbed; there were weary marches to be taken; there were hard knocks going in front of the walls of Ramoth before they got inside it; and on the whole it was more comfortable to sit at home, or look after their farms and their merchandise, than to embark on the quixotic attempt to win back a city that had not been theirs for ever so long, and that they had got on very well without.

And so it is with hosts of Christian people; we

do not realise how much we have that we never get any good out of. And, in the second place, we had rather just stay where we are, and make the best of the world as it is, and the desires of our hearts go in another direction than for our increase in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour. Ah, brethren! if we had a claim to some great property, or any other wealth that we really cared about, should we be so very indifferent as to asserting our rights? Should we not fight to the death, some of us, for the last inch of soil, for the last ounce of treasure, that belonged to us? When you really value a thing, you secure the greatest possible amount of it; and there is very little margin between what you own and what you use.

And if there is such a tremendous difference between the breadth of the one and the narrowness of the other in our Christian life, there can be no reason for it except this, that we do not care enough about spiritual blessings and forces to make the effort that is needed to win and keep, and get the good of, all that is ours.

And is not that something like despising the birth-right? Is it not a criminal thing for Christian people thus to neglect, and to put aside, and never to seek to obtain, all these great gifts of God? There they lie at our doors, and they are ours for the taking. Suppose a carrier brought you a whole waggon full of precious goods, and put them down at your door, and you were not at the trouble to open your doors, or to carry the goods into your cellars. That would not look as if you cared much either for the goods or for the giver. And I wonder how many of us are chargeable with that criminal despising of God's gifts, which is clearly the explanation of our letting them lie rotting, as it were,

at our gates? We are starving paupers in the midst of plenty.

‘My God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory, by Christ Jesus,’ says Paul. You have the right to them all. Draw cheques against the capital that is lodged in your name in that great bank.

III. And so, lastly, my text suggests the effort that is needed to make our own ours.

‘We be still, and take it not out of the hands of the King of Syria.’ Then these things that are ours, by God’s gift, by Christ’s purchase, by the Spirit’s influence, will need our effort to secure them. And that is no contradiction, nor any paradox. God does exactly in the same way with regard to a great many of His natural gifts as He does with regard to His spiritual ones. He gives them to us, but we hold them on this tenure, that we put forth our best efforts to get and to keep them. His giving them does not set aside our taking. However much we tried we could not take them out of His hand if it were clenched. Open as His hand is, and stretched out to us as it is, the gifts that sparkle in it are not transferred to our hands unless we ourselves put forth an effort.

So let me say that one large part of the discipline by which men make their own their own is by familiarising themselves with the thought of the larger possibilities of unattained possessions which God has given them. That is true in everything. To recognise our present imperfection, and to see stretching before us glorious and immense possibilities, opening out into a vista where our eyesight fails us to travel to its end, is the very salt of life in every region. Artist, student, all of us ‘are saved by hope,’ in a very much

wider sense than the Apostle meant by that great saying. And whosoever has once lost, or felt becoming dim, the vision before him of a possible better than his present best, in any region, is in that region condemned to grow no more. If we desire to have any kind of advancement, it is only possible for us, when there gleams ever before us the untravelled road, and we see at the end of it unattained brightnesses and blessings.

And we Christian people have an endless prospect of that sort stretching before us. Oh, if we looked at it oftener, 'having respect unto the recompense of the reward,' we should find it easier to dash at any Ramoth-Gilead, and get it out of the hands of the strongest of the enemies that may bar our way to it. Let us familiarise ourselves with the thought of our present imperfection, and of our future completeness, and of the possibilities which may become actualities, even here and now; and let us not fitfully use what power we have, but make the best of what graces are ours, and enjoy and expatiate in the spiritual blessings of peace and rest which Christ has already given to us. 'To him that hath shall be given,' and the surest way to lose what we have is to neglect to increase it.

And, above all, let us keep nearer to our Master, and live more in fellowship with our Lord, and that will help us to deny ourselves to ungodliness and worldly lusts. It is the prevalence of these, and the absence of self-denial, that ruins most of the Christian lives that are ruined in this world. If a man wants to be what he is not, he must cease to be what he is.

Self-sacrifice, and the emptying of our hearts of trash and trifles, is the only way to get our hearts filled with God and with His blessing. Let us keep near Jesus Christ. If we have Him for ours we have

peace, we have power, we have purity. 'He of God is made unto us' all in all, and every gift that may adorn humanity, and make our lives joyous and ourselves noble, is given to us in Jesus Christ. Let us put away from ourselves, then, this slothful indifference to our unattained possessions. 'Know ye that Ramoth is ours?' 'Let us be still' no longer. 'All things are yours, whether the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come: all are yours if ye are Christ's.'

AHAB AND MICAIAH

'And Jehoshaphat said, Is there not here a prophet of the Lord besides, that we might enquire of him? 8. And the king of Israel said unto Jehoshaphat, There is yet one man, Micalah the son of Imlah, by whom we may enquire of the Lord: but I hate him; for he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil.'—1 KINGS xxii. 7, 8.

AN ill-omened alliance had been struck up between Ahab of Israel and Jehoshaphat of Judah. The latter, who would have been much better in Jerusalem, had come down to Samaria to join in an assault on the kingdom of Damascus; but, like a great many other people, Jehoshaphat first made up his mind without asking God, and then thought that it might be well to get some kind of varnish of a religious sanction for his decision. So he proposes to Ahab to inquire of the Lord about this matter. One would have thought that that should have been done before, and not after, the determination was made. Ahab does not at all see the necessity for such a thing, but, to please his scrupulous ally, he sends for his priests. They came, four hundred of them, and of course they all played the tune that Ahab called for. It is not difficult to get prophets to

pat a king on the back, and tell him, 'Do what you like.'

But Jehoshaphat was not satisfied yet. Perhaps he thought that Ahab's clergy were not exactly God's prophets, but at all events he wanted an independent opinion; and so he asks if there is not in all Samaria a man that can be trusted to speak out. He gets for answer the name of this 'Micaiah the son of Imlah.' Ahab had had experience of him, and knew his man; and the very name leads him to an explosion of passion, which, like other explosions, lays bare some very ugly depths. 'I hate him; for he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil.'

That is a curious mood, is it not? that a man should know another to be a messenger of God, and therefore know that his words are true, and that if he asked his counsel he would be forbidden to do the thing that he is dead set on doing, and would be warned that to do it was destruction; and that still he should not ask the counsel, nor ever dream of dropping the purpose, but should burst out in a passion of puerile rage against the counsellor, and will have none of his reproofs. Very curious! But there are a great many of us that have something of the same mood in us, though we do not speak it out as plainly as Ahab did. It lurks more or less in us all, and it largely determines the attitude that some of us take to Christianity and to Christ. So I wish to say a word or two about it.

I. My text suggests the inevitable opposition between a message from God, and man's evil.

No doubt, God is love; and just because He is, it is absolutely necessary that what comes from Him, and is the reflex and cast, so to speak, of His character, should

be in stern and continual antagonism to that evil which is the worst foe of men, and is sure to lead to their death. It is because God is love, that 'to the froward He shows Himself froward,' and opposes that which, unopposed and yielded to, will ruin the man that does it. So this is one of the characteristic marks of all true messages from God, that men who will not part with their evil call them 'stern,' 'rigid,' 'gloomy,' 'narrow.' Yes, of course; because God must look upon godless lives with disapprobation, and must desire by all means to draw men away from that which is drawing them away from Him and to their death.

Now, I suppose I need not spend time in enumerating or describing the points in the attitude of Christianity towards the solemn fact of human sin, which correspond to Ahab's complaint that the prophet spake always 'not good concerning him, but evil.' The 'gospel' of Jesus Christ proves its name to be true, and that it is 'good news,' not only by its graciousness, its promises, its offers, and the rich blessings of eternal life with which its hands are full, but by its severity, as men call it. One characteristic of the gospel is the altogether unique place which the fact of sin fills in it. There is no other religion on the face of the earth that has so grasped and made prominent this thought: 'All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.' There is none that has painted human nature as it is in such dark colours, because there is none that knows itself to be able to change human nature into such radiance of glory and purity. The gospel has, if I might so say, on its palette a far greater range of pigments than any other system. Its blacks are blacker; its whites are whiter; its golds are more lustrous than those of other painters of human nature as it is and as it may become.

It is a **mark** of its divine origin that it unfalteringly looks facts in the face, and will not say smooth things about men as they are.

Side by side with that characteristic of the dark picture which it draws of us, as we are in ourselves, is its unhesitating restraint or condemnation of deep-seated desires and tendencies. It does not come to men with the smooth words on its lips, 'Do as thou wilt.' It does not seek for favour by relaxing bonds, but it rigidly builds up a wall on either side of a narrow path, and says, 'Walk within these limits and thou art safe. Go beyond them a hair's-breadth, and thou perishest.' It may suit Ahab's prophets to fling the reins on the neck of human nature; God's prophet says, 'Thou shalt not.' That is another of the tests of divine origin, that there shall be no base compliance with inclinations, but rigid condemnation of many of our deep desires.

Side by side with these two, there is a third characteristic that the Word, which is the outcome and expression of the divine love, is distinguished by its plain and stern declarations of the bitter consequences of evil-doing. I need not dwell upon these, brethren. They seem to me to be far too solemn to be spoken of by a man to men in other words than Scripture's. But I beseech you to remember that this, too, is the characteristic of Christ's message. So a man should feel, when he thinks of the dark and solemn things that the Old Testament partially, and the New Testament more clearly, utter as to the death which is the outcome of sin, that these are indeed the very voice of infinite love pleading with us all. Brother! do not so misapprehend facts as to think that the restraints and threatenings and dark pictures which Christ and His

servants have drawn are anything but the utterance of the purest affection.

II. Now, secondly, let me ask you to look for a moment at the strange dislike which this attitude of Christianity kindles.

I have said that Ahab's mental condition was a very odd one. Strange as it is, it is, as I have already remarked, in some degree a very frequent one. There are in us all, as we see in many regions of life, the beginnings of the same kind of feeling. Here, for example, is a course that I am quite sure, if I pursue it, will land me in evil. Does the drunkard take a glass the less, because he knows that if he goes on he will have a drunkard's liver and die a miserable death? Does the gambler ever take away his hand from the pack of cards or the dice-box, because he knows that play means, in the long run, poverty and disgrace? When a man sets his will upon a certain course, he is like a bull that has started in its rage. Down goes the head, and, with eyes shut, he will charge a stone wall or an iron door, though he knows it will smash his skull. Men are very foolish animals; and there is no greater mark of their folly than the conspicuous and oft-repeated fact that the clearest vision of the consequences of a course of conduct is powerless to turn a man from it, when once his passions, or his will, or, worse still, his weakness, or, worst of all, his habits, have bound him to it.

Take another illustration. Do we not all know that honest friends have sometimes fallen out of favour, perhaps with ourselves, because they have persistently kept telling us what our consciences and common-sense knew to be true, that if we go on by that road we shall be suffocated in a bog? A man makes up his

mind to a course of conduct. He has a shrewd suspicion that an honest friend will condemn him, and that the condemnation will be right. What does he do, therefore? He never consults his friend, but if by chance that friend should say what was expected of him, he gets angry with his adviser and doggedly goes his own road. I suppose we all know what it is to treat our consciences in the style in which Ahab treated Micaiah. We do not listen to them because we know what they will say before they have said it; and we call ourselves sensible people! Martin Luther once said, 'It is neither safe nor *wise* to do anything against conscience.' But Ahab put Micaiah in prison; and we shut up our consciences in a dungeon, and put a gag in their mouths, and a muffler over the gag, that we may hear them say no word, because we know that what we are doing, and we are doggedly determined to do, is wrong.

But the saddest illustration of this infatuation is to be found in the attitude that many men take in regard to Christianity. There is a great craving to-day, more perhaps than there has been in some other periods of the world's history, for a religion which shall adorn, but shall not restrain; for a religion which shall be toothless, and have no bite in it; for a religion that shall sanction anything that it pleases our sovereign mightiness to want to do. We should all like to have God's sanction for our actions. But there are a great many of us who will not take the only way to secure that—viz. to do the actions which He commands, and to abstain from those which He forbids. Popular Christianity is a very easy-fitting garment; it is like an old shoe that you can slip off and on without any difficulty. But a religion which does not put up a strong barrier between you and many of your inclinations is

not worth anything. The mark of a message from God is that it restrains and coerces and forbids and commands. And some of you do not like it because it does.

There is a great tendency in this day to cut out of the Old and New Testaments all the pages that say things like this, 'The soul that sinneth it shall die'; or things like this, 'This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men love darkness rather than light'; or things like this, 'Then shall the wicked go away into outer darkness.' Brethren, men being what they are, and God being what He is, there can be no divine message without a side of what the world calls threatening, or what Ahab called 'prophesying evil.' I beseech you, do not be carried away by the modern talk about Christianity being gloomy and dark, or fancy that we put a blot and an excrescence upon the pure religion of the Man of Nazareth, when we speak of the death that follows sin, and of the darkness into which unbelief carries a man.

III. Once more, let me say a word about the intense folly of such an attitude.

Ahab hated Micaiah. Why? Because Micaiah told him what would come to him as the fruit of his own actions. That was foolish. It is no less foolish for people to take up a position of dislike, and to turn away from the gospel of Jesus Christ because it speaks in like manner. I said that men are very foolish animals; there is surely nothing in all the annals of human stupidity more stupid than to be angry with the word that tells you the truth about what you are bringing down upon your heads. It is absurd, because Micaiah did not make the evil, but Ahab made it; and Micaiah's business was only to tell

him what he was doing. It is absurd, because the only question to be asked is, Are the warnings true? are the threatenings representations of what really will come? are the prohibitions reasonable? And it is absurd, because, if these things are so—if it is true that the soul that sinneth dies, and will die; if it is true that you, who have heard of the name and the salvation of Jesus Christ over and over again, and have turned away from it, will, if you continue in that negligence and unbelief, reap bitter fruits here and hereafter therefrom—if these things are true, surely the man that tells you so, and the gospel that tells you so, deserve better treatment than Ahab's petulant hatred or your stolid indifference and neglect.

Would you think it wise for a sea-captain to try to take the clapper out of the bell that floats and tolls above a shoal on which his ship will be wrecked if it strikes? Would it be wise to put out the lighthouse lamps, and then think that you had abolished the reef? Does the signalman with his red flag make the danger of which he warns, and is it not like a baby to hate and to neglect the message that comes to you and says, 'Turn ye, turn ye, why will ye die'?

IV. So, lastly, I notice the end of this foolish attitude.

Ahab was told in plain words by Micaiah, before the interview closed, that he would never come back again in peace. He ordered the bold prophet into prison, and rode away gaily, no doubt, to his campaign. Weak men are very often obstinate, because they are not strong enough to rise to the height of changing a purpose when reason condemns it. This weak man was always obstinate in the wrong place, as so many of us are. So away he went, down from Samaria, across the plain, down to the fords of the Jordan. But when he had

crossed to the other side, and was coming near his objective point, the memories of Micaiah in prison at Samaria began to sit heavy on his soul.

So he tried to deceive divine judgment, and got up an ingenious scheme by which his ally was to go into the field in royal pomp, and he to slip into it disguised. A great many of us try to hoodwink God, and it does not answer. The man who 'drew the bow at a venture' had his hand guided by a higher Hand. Ahab was plated all over with iron and brass, but there is always a crevice through which God's arrow can find its way; and, where God's arrow finds its way, it kills. When the night fell, he was lying dead on his chariot floor, and the host was scattered, and Micaiah, the prisoner, was avenged; and his word had taken hold on the despiser of it.

So it always will be. So it will be with us, dear brethren, if we do not give heed to our ways and listen to the word which may be bitter in the mouth, but, eaten, turns sweet as honey. Nailing the index of the barometer to 'set fair' will not keep off the thunderstorm, and no negligence or dislike of divine threatenings will arrest the slow, solemn march, inevitable as destiny, of the consequences of our doings. Things will be as they will be. Believed or unbelieved, the avalanche will come.

Dear brethren, there is one way to get Micaiah on your side. Listen to him, and then he will speak good to you, and not what you foolishly call evil. Let God's word convince you of sin. Let it bring you to the Cross for pardon. Jesus Christ addresses each of us in the Apostle's words: 'Am I therefore become your enemy because I tell you the truth?' The sternest threatenings in the Bible come from the lips of that

infinite Love. If you will listen to Him, if you will yield yourselves to Him, if you will take Him for your Saviour and your Lord, if you will cast your confidence and anchor your love upon Him, if you will let Him restrain you, if you will consult Him about what He would have you do, if you will accept His prohibitions as well as His permissions, then His word and His act to you, here and hereafter, will be only good and not evil, all the days of your life.

Remember Ahab lying dead on the floor of his chariot in a pool of his own blood, and bethink yourselves of what despising the threatenings, and turning away from the rebukes and prohibitions of the divine word, come to. These threatenings are spoken that they may never need to be put in effect. If you give heed to them they will never be put in effect in regard to you, if you neglect them and 'will none of' God's 'reproof,' they will come down on you like a mighty rock loosed from the mountain, and will grind you to powder.

THE SECOND BOOK OF KINGS

THE CHARIOT OF FIRE

'And it came to pass, when the Lord would take up Elijah into heaven by a whirlwind, that Elijah went with Elisha from Gilgal. 2. And Elijah said unto Elisha, Tarry here, I pray thee; for the Lord hath sent me to Beth-el. And Elisha said unto him, As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. So they went down to Beth-el. 3. And the sons of the prophets that were at Beth-el came forth to Elisha and said unto him, Knowest thou that the Lord will take away thy master from thy head to-day? And he said, Yea, I know it; hold ye your peace. 4. And Elijah said unto him, Elisha, tarry here, I pray thee: for the Lord hath sent me to Jericho. And he said, As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. So they came to Jericho. 5. And the sons of the prophets that were at Jericho came to Elisha, and said unto him, Knowest thou that the Lord will take away thy master from thy head to-day? And he answered, Yea, I know it; hold ye your peace. 6. And Elijah said unto him, Tarry, I pray thee, here: for the Lord hath sent me to Jordan. And he said, As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. And they two went on. 7. And fifty men of the sons of the prophets went, and stood to view afar off: and they two stood by Jordan. 8. And Elijah took his mantle, and wrapped it together, and smote the waters, and they were divided hither and thither, so that they two went over on dry ground. 9. And it came to pass, when they were gone over, that Elijah said unto Elisha, Ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken away from thee. And Elisha said, I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me. 10. And he said, Thou hast asked a hard thing; nevertheless, if thou see me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so. 11. And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.'—2 KINGS II. 1-11.

ELIJAH'S end is in keeping with his career. From his first abrupt appearance it had been fitly symbolised by the stormy wind and flaming fire which he heard and saw at Horeb, and now these were to be the vehicles which should sweep him into the heavens. He came like a whirlwind, he burned like a fire, and in fire and whirlwind he disappeared. The story is wonderful in pathos and simplicity. Surely never was such a miracle told so quietly. The actual ascension is narrated in a sentence. Its preliminaries take up the rest of this narrative.

I. The journey from Gilgal to the eastern side of Jordan is minutely described in its stages. Apparently this Gilgal is not the well-known place so called, which was down in the Jordan valley close to Jericho, else the road from it to Bethel could not have been called a going down (v. 2). It probably lay to the north of Bethel, which would then be between it and Jericho, where the Jordan was to be passed. Elijah was not sent on an aimless round of farewell visits, but by the direct road to his destination. Note that he and Elisha and the 'sons of the prophets' all know that he is near his end. How this came about we are not told, and need not speculate; but though all knew, none seems to have known that the others knew. Elijah does not explain to Elisha why he wished him to stay behind, nor Elisha to Elijah why he was so resolved to keep by him. The knowledge and the silence would give peculiar solemnity and sweet bitterness to these last hours. How often a similar combination weighs on the hearts of a household, who all know that a dear one is soon to be taken away, and yet can only be silent about what is uppermost in their thoughts!

Why did Elijah wish Elisha to stay behind? Apparently to spare him the pain of seeing his master depart. With loving concealment, he tried to make Elisha suppose that his errand to Bethel and then to Jericho was but a common one, to be soon despatched. It was a little touch of tenderness in the strong, rough man. Note, too, the gradual disclosure to Elijah of the places to which he was to go. He is only bid to go to Bethel, and not till he gets there is he further sent on to Jericho, and, presumably, only when there is directed to cross Jordan. God does not show all the road at once, even if it lead to glory, but step by step,

and a second stage only when we have obediently traversed the first. We get light as we go. Elisha's clinging to his master till the very last is but too intelligible to many of us who have gone through the same sorrow, and counted each moment of companionship with some dear one about to leave earth as priceless gain, to be treasured in the sacreddest recesses of memory for evermore.

It has been thought that the object of the visits to Bethel and Jericho was to give parting directions to the schools of the prophets at each place; but that is read into the narrative, which gives no hint that Elijah had any communication with these. Rather the contrary is implied, both in the fact that the sons of the prophets' came to the travellers, not the travellers to them, and in their addressing Elisha, as if some awe of the master kept them from speaking to him. An Elijah marching to his chariot of fire was not a man for raw youths to approach lightly. Their question is met by Elisha with curtness and scant courtesy, which indicates that it was asked in no sympathetic spirit, but from mere love of telling bad news, and of vulgar excitement. Even the gentle Elisha is stirred to rebuke the gossiping chatterers, who intrude their curiosity into that sacred hour. There are abundance of such busy-bodies always ready to buzz about any bleeding heart, and sorrow has often to be stern in order to be unmolested.

II. The second stage is the passage of Jordan. The verbal repetition of the same dialogue at Jericho as at Bethel increases the impression of prolonged loving struggle between the two prophets. At last they stand on the western bank of Jordan, at their feet the spot where the hurrying river had been stayed by the ark

till the tribes had passed over, before them the mountains bordering Elijah's homeland of Gilead on the left, and away on the right the lone peak where Moses had died 'by the mouth of the Lord.' The soil was redolent of the miracles of the Mosaic age, and the dividing of the waters by Elijah is meant to bring the present into vital connection with that past, and to designate him as parallel with the former leader. Note the vigour with which he twists his characteristic mantle into a kind of rod, and strikes the waters strongly. The repetition of the former miracle is a sign that the unexhausted Power which wrought it is with Elijah. The God of yesterday is the God of to-day, and nothing that was done in the past but will be repeated in essence, though not in form, in the present. 'As we have heard so have we seen.' The former miracle had been done for a nation; this is performed for two men. It teaches the preciousness of His individual servants in God's eyes. The former had been done through the ark; this, by the prophet's mantle. Power is lodged in the faithful messenger. God's strength dwells in those who love Him. The former miracle had been the close of the desert wanderings and the gateway to Canaan. Though Elijah's face is turned in the opposite direction, does not its repetition suggest that for him, too, the impending translation was to be the end of wilderness weariness and toil, and the entrance on rest?

III. Elisha's request is the next stage in the story. How far they two 'went on' is not told. The Bible does not foster the craving to know the exact situation where sacred things happened, the gratification of which might feed superstition, but could not increase reverence. Possibly they had drawn near the

eastern hills, and were out of sight of the fifty curious gazers on the other bank. Elijah at last spoke the truth which both knew. How true to nature is that reticence kept up till the last moment, and then broken so tenderly!—‘Ask what I shall do for thee, before.’ Probably he did not mean any supernatural gift, but simply some parting token of love; for he is startled at the response of Elisha. A true disciple can desire nothing more than a portion of his master’s spirit. ‘It is enough for the disciple that he be as his Master.’ They covet wisely and with a noble covetousness who most desire spiritual gifts to fit them for their vocation. It was an unworldly soul which asked but for such a legacy.

The ‘double portion’ does not mean twice as much as Elijah’s portion had been, but twice as much as other ‘sons of the prophets’ would receive. Elisha reckoned himself Elijah’s first-born spiritual son, and asked for the elder brother’s share, because he had been designated as successor, and would require more than others for his work. The new sense of responsibility is coming on him, and teaching him his need. Well for us if higher positions make us lowlier, in the consciousness of our own unfitness without divine help! Elijah knows that his spirit was not his to give, and can only refer his successor to the Fountain from which he had drawn; for the sign which he gives is obviously not within his power to determine. If the Lord shows the ascending master to him who is left, He will give the servant his desire.

A portion of their ‘spirit’ is the very thing which teachers and prophets cannot give. They may give their systems or their methods, their favourite ideas or cut-and-dry maxims and principles, and so leave a

race of pygmies who give themselves airs as being their disciples, but their spirit they cannot impart. Contrast with this limitation of power confessed by Elijah, His consciousness who breathed on eleven poor men, and said, 'Receive ye the Holy Ghost.' No man could say that without absurdity or blasphemy. The gift impossible to man is the very characteristic gift of Jesus, who 'has power over the Spirit of holiness.' Must He not thereby be 'declared to be the Son of God'?

IV. The climax of this lesson is that stupendous scene of the translation. Note how the 'Behold' suggests the suddenness of the appearance of the fiery chariot, which came flaming between the two men eagerly talking, and drove them apart. The description of the departure, in its brevity and incompleteness, sounds like the report of the only eye-witness, who had the fiery chariot between him and Elijah, and was too bewildered to see precisely what happened. All he knew was the sudden appearance of the fiery equipage, and then that, suddenly, and apparently swiftly, a rushing mighty wind swept away chariot and prophet into the heavens. He saw it, as the next verse after this passage tells us, only long enough to break into one rapturous and yet lamenting cry, and then all vanished, and he stood alone with an apparently empty heaven above him, the whirlwind sunk to calm, and Elijah's mantle at his feet.

The teaching of the event is plain. As for the pre-Mosaic ages the translation of Enoch, and for the earlier Mosaic epoch the mysterious death of Moses, so for the prophetic period the carrying to heaven of Elijah, witnessed of a life beyond death, and of death as the wages of sin, which God could remit, if He willed, in the case of faithful service. Enoch and

Elijah were led round the head of the valley on the heights, and reached the other side without having to go down into the cold waters flowing in the bottom; and though we cannot tread their path, the joy of their experience has not ceased to be a joy to us, if we walk with God. Death is still the coming of the chariot and horses of fire to bear the believer home. The same exclamation which fell from Elisha's lips, as he saw the chariot sweep up the sky, was spoken over him as he lay sick 'of the sickness whereof he should die.'

But the most instructive view of Elijah's translation is its parallel and contrast with Christ's Ascension. The one was by outward means; the other by inward energy. Storm and fire bore Elijah up into a region strange to him. Christ 'ascended up where He was before,' returning by the propriety of His nature to His eternal dwelling-place. The one is accomplished with significant disturbance, of whirlwind and flame; the other is gentle, like the life which it closed, and the last sight of Him was with extended hands of blessing. Each life closed in a manner corresponding to its character. The one was swift and sudden. The other was a slow, solemn motion, vividly described as being 'borne upwards' and as 'going into heaven.' The one bore a mortal into 'heaven.' In the other, the Son of God, our great High Priest, 'hath passed through the heavens,' and now, far above them all, He is 'Head over all things.'

THE TRANSLATION OF ELIJAH AND THE ASCENSION OF CHRIST

'And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.'—2 KINGS ii. 11.

'And it came to pass, while He blessed them, He was parted from them, and carried up into heaven.'—LUKE xxiv. 51.

THESE two events, the translation of Elijah and the Ascension of our Lord, have sometimes been put side by side in order to show that the latter narrative is nothing but a 'variant' of the former. See, it is said, the source of your New Testament story is only the old legend shaped anew by the wistful regrets of the early disciples. But to me it seems that the simple comparison of the two narratives is sufficient to bring out such fundamental difference in the ideas which they respectively embody as amount to opposition, and make any such theory of the origin of the latter absurdly improbable. I could wish no better foil for the history of the Ascension than the history of Elijah's rapture. The comparison brings out contrasts at every step, and there is no readier way of throwing into strong relief the meaning and purpose of the former, than holding up beside it the story of the latter. The real parallel makes the divergences the more remarkable, for likeness sharpens our perception of unlikeness, and no contrast is so forcible as the contrast of things that correspond. I am much mistaken if we shall not find almost every truth of importance connected with our Lord's Ascension emphasised for us by the comparison to which we now proceed.

I. The first point which may be mentioned is the

contrast between the manner of Elijah's translation, and that of our Lord's Ascension.

It is perhaps not without significance that the place of the one event was on the uplands or in some of the rocky gorges beyond Jordan, and that of the other, the slopes of Olivet above Bethany. The lonely prophet, who had burst like a meteor on Israel from the solitudes of Gilead, whose fervour had ever and again been rekindled by return to the wilderness, whose whole career had isolated him from men, found the fitting place for that last wonder amidst the stern silence where he had so often sought asylum and inspiration. He was close to the scenes of mighty events in the past. There, on that overhanging peak, the lawgiver whose work he was continuing, and with whom he was to be so strangely associated on the Mount of Transfiguration, had made himself ready for his lonely grave. Here at his feet, the river had parted for the victorious march of Israel. Away down on his horizon the sunshine gleamed on the waters of the Dead Sea ; and thus, on his native soil, surrounded by memorials of the Law which he laboured to restore, and of the victories which he would fain have brought back, and of the judgments which he saw again impending over Israel, the stern, solitary ascetic, the prophet of righteousness, whose single arm stayed the downward course of a nation, passed from his toil and his warfare.

What a different set of associations cluster round the place of Christ's Ascension—'Bethany,' or, as it is more particularly specified in the Acts, 'Olivet' ! In the very heart of the land, close by and yet out of sight of the great city, in no wild solitude, but perhaps in some dimple of the hill, neither shunning nor courting spectators, with the quiet home where He had rested so

often in the little village at their feet there, and Gethsemane a few furlongs off, in such scenes did the Christ 'whose delights were with the sons of men,' and His life lived in closest companionship with His brethren, choose the place whence He should 'ascend to their Father and His Father.' Nor perhaps was it without a meaning that the Mount which received the last print of His ascending footstep was that which a mysterious prophecy designated as destined to receive the first print of the footstep of the Lord coming at a future day to end the long warfare with evil.

But more important than the localities is the contrasted manner of the two ascents. The prophet's end was like the man. It was fitting that he should be swept up the skies in tempest and fire. The impetuosity of his nature, and the stormy energy of his career, had already been symbolised in the mighty and strong wind which rent the rocks, and in the fire that followed the earthquake; and similarly nothing could be more appropriate than that sudden rapture in storm and whirlwind, escorted by the flaming chivalry of heaven.

Nor is it only as appropriate to the character of the prophet and his work that this tempestuous translation is noteworthy. It also suggests very plainly that Elijah was lifted to the skies by power acting on him from without. He did not ascend; he was carried up; the earthly frame and the human nature had no power to rise. 'No man hath ascended into heaven.' The two men of whom the Old Testament speaks were alike in this, that 'God took them.' The tempest and the fiery chariot tell us how great was the exercise of divine power which bore the gross mortality thither, and how unfamiliar was the sphere into which it passed.

How full of the very spirit of Christ's whole life is

the contrasted manner of His Ascension! The silent gentleness, which did not strive nor cry nor cause His voice to be heard in the streets, marks Him even in that hour of lofty and transcendent triumph. There is no outward sign to accompany His slow upward movement through the quiet air. No blaze of fiery chariots, nor agitation of tempest is needed to bear Him heavenwards. The outstretched hands drop the dew of His benediction on the little company, and so He floats upward, His own will and indwelling power the royal chariot which bears Him, and calmly 'leaves the world and goes unto the Father.' The slow, continuous movement of ascent is emphatically made prominent in the brief narratives, both by the phrase in Luke, 'He was carried up,' which expresses continuous leisurely motion, and by the picture in the Acts, of the disciples gazing into heaven 'as He went up,' in which latter word is brought out, not only the slowness of the movement, but its origin in His own will and its execution by His own power.

Nor is this absence of any vehicle or external agency destroyed by the fact that 'a cloud' received Him out of their sight, for its purpose was not to raise Him heavenward, but to hide Him from the gazers' eyes, that He might not seem to them to dwindle into distance, but that their last look and memory might be of His clearly discerned and loving face. Possibly, too, it may be intended to remind us of the cloud which guided Israel, the glory which dwelt between the cherubim, the cloud which overshadowed the Mount of Transfiguration, and to set forth a symbol of the Divine Presence welcoming to itself, His battle fought, the Son of His love.

Be that as it may, the manner of our Lord's Ascension

by His own inherent power is brought into boldest relief when contrasted with Elijah's rapture, and is evidently the fitting expression, as it is the consequence, of His sole and singular divine nature. It accords with His own mode of reference to the Ascension, while He was on earth, which ever represents Him not as *being taken*, but as *going*: 'I leave the world and go to the Father.' 'I ascend to My Father and your Father.' The highest hope of the devoutest souls before Him had been, 'Thou wilt afterwards take me to glory.' The highest hope of devout souls since Him has been, 'We shall be caught up to meet the Lord.' But this Man ever speaks of Himself as able when He will, by His own power, to rise where no man hath ascended. His divine nature and pre-existence shine clearly forth, and as we stand gazing at Him blessing the world as He rises into the heavens, we know that we are looking on no mere mysterious elevation of a mortal to the skies, but are beholding the return of the Incarnate Lord, who willed to tarry among our earthly tabernacles for a time, to the glory where He was before, 'His own calm home, His habitation from eternity.'

II. Another striking point of contrast embraces the relation which these two events respectively bear to the life's work which had preceded them.

The falling mantle of Elijah has become a symbol known to all the world, for the transference of unfinished tasks and the appointment of successors to departed greatness. Elisha asked that he might have a double portion of his master's spirit, not meaning twice as much as his master had had, but the eldest son's share of the father's possessions, the double of the other children's portion. And, though his master had no power to bestow the gift, and had to reply as one

who has nothing that he has not received, and cannot dispose of the grace that dwells in him, the prayer was answered, and the feebler nature of Elisha was fitted for the continuance of the work which Elijah left undone.

The mantle that passed from one to the other was the symbol of office and authority transferred; the functions were the same, whilst the holders had changed. The sons of the prophets bow before the new master; 'the spirit of Elijah doth rest on Elisha.'

So the world goes on. Man after man serves his generation by the will of God, and is gathered to his fathers; and a new arm grasps the mantle to smite Jordan, and a new voice speaks from his empty place, and men recognise the successor, and forget the predecessor.

We turn to Christ's Ascension, and there we meet with nothing analogous to this transference of office. No mantle falling from His shoulders lights on any of that group, none are hailed as His successors. What He has done bears and needs no repetition whilst time shall roll, whilst eternity shall last. His work is unique: 'the help that is done on earth, He doeth it all Himself.' His Ascension completed the witness of heaven, begun at His resurrection, that 'He has offered one sacrifice for sins, for ever.' He has left no unfinished work which another may perfect. He has done no work which another may do again for new generations. He has spoken all truth, and none may add to His words. He has fulfilled all righteousness, and none may better His pattern. He has borne all the world's sin, and no time can waste the power of that sacrifice, nor any man add to its absolute sufficiency. This King of men wears a crown to which there is no heir. This Priest has a priesthood which passes to no other. This 'Prophet'

does 'live for ever.' The world sees all other guides and helpers pass away, and every man's work is caught up by other hands and carried on after he drops it, and the short memories and shorter gratitudes of men turn to the rising sun; but one Name remains undimmed by distance, and one work remains unapproached and unapproachable, and one Man remains whose office none other can hold, whose bow none but He can bend, whose mantle none can wear. Christ has ascended up on high and left a finished work for all men to trust, for no man to continue.

III. Whilst our Lord's Ascension is thus marked as the seal of a work in which He has no successor, it is also emphatically set forth, by contrast with Elijah's translation, as the transition to a continuous energy for and in the world.

Clearly the other narrative derives all its pathos from the thought that Elijah's work is done. — His task is over, and nothing more is to be hoped for from him. But that same absence from the history of Christ's Ascension, of any hint of a successor, to which we have referred in the previous remarks, has an obvious bearing on His present relation to the world as well as on the completeness of His unique past work.

When Christ ascended up on high, He relinquished nothing of His activity for us, but only cast it into a new form, which in some sense is yet higher than that which it took on earth. His work for the world is in one aspect completed on the Cross, but in another it will never be completed until all the blessings which that Cross has lodged in the midst of humanity, have reached their widest possible diffusion and their highest possible development. Long ages ago He cried, 'It is finished,' but we may be far yet from the time when He shall say, 'It is done'; and for all the slow years

between His own word gives us the law of His activity, 'My Father worketh hitherto, and I work.'

Christ's Ascension is no withdrawal of the Captain of our salvation from the field where we are left to fight, nor has He gone up to the mountain, leaving us alone to tug at the oar, and shiver in the cold night air. True, there may seem a strange contrast between the present condition of the Lord who 'was received up into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God,' and that of the servants wandering through the world on *His* business; but the contrast is harmonised by the next words, 'the Lord also working with them.' Yes, He has gone up to sit at the right hand of God. That session at God's right hand to which the Ascension is chiefly of importance as the transition, means the repose of a perfected redemption, the communion of the Son with the Father, the exercise of all the omnipotence of God, the administration of the world's history. He has ascended that He might fill all things, that He might pour out His Spirit upon us, that the path to God may be trodden by our lame feet, that the whole resources of the divine nature may be wielded by the hands that were nailed to the Cross, that the mighty purpose of salvation may be fulfilled.

Elijah knew not whether his spirit could descend upon his follower. But Christ, though, as we have said, He left no legacy of falling mantle to any, left His Spirit to His people. What Elisha gained, Elijah lost. What Elisha desired, Elijah could not give nor guarantee. How firm and assured beside Elijah's dubious 'Thou hast asked a hard thing,' and his 'If thou see me, it shall be so,' is Christ's 'It is expedient for you that I go away. For if I go not away the Comforter will not come, but if I depart, I will send Him unto you.'

Manifold are the forms of that new and continuous activity of Christ into which He passed when He left the earth: and as we contrast these with the utter helplessness any longer to counsel, rebuke or save, to which death reduces those who love us best, and to which even his glorious rapture into the heavens brought the strong prophet of fire, we can take up, with a new depth of meaning, the ancient words that tell of Christ's exclusive prerogative of succouring and inspiring from within the veil: 'Thou hast ascended on high; Thou hast led captivity captive; Thou hast received gifts for men.'

IV. The Ascension of Christ is still further set forth, in its very circumstances, by contrast with Elijah's translation, as bearing on the hopes of humanity for the future.

The prophet is caught up to the glory and repose for himself alone, and the sole share which the gazing follower or the sons of the prophets straining their eyes there at Jericho, had in his triumph, was a deepened conviction of his prophetic mission, and perhaps some clearer faith in a future life. Their wonder and sorrow, Elisha's immediate exercise of his new power, the prophets' immediate transference of their allegiance to their new head, show that on both sides it was felt that they had no part in the event beyond that of awe-struck beholders. No light streamed from it on their own future. The path they had to tread was still the common road into the great darkness, as solitary and unknown as before. The chariot of fire parted their master from the common experience of humanity as from their fellowship, making him an exception to the sad rule of death, which frowned the grimmer and more inexorable by contrast with his radiant translation.

The very reverse is true of Christ's Ascension. In Him our nature is taken up to the throne of God. His Resurrection assures us that 'them which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him.' His passage to the heavens assures us that 'they who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them,' and that all of both companies shall with Him live and reign, sharing His dominion, and moulded to His image.

If we would know of what our manhood is capable, if we would rise to the height of the hopes which God means that we should cherish, if we would gain a living grasp of the power that fulfils them, we have to stand there, gazing on the piled cloud that sails slowly upwards, the pure floor for our Brother's feet. As we watch it rising with a motion which is rest, we have the right to think, 'Thither the Forerunner is for us entered.' We see there what man is meant for, what men who love Him attain. True, the world is still full of death and sorrow, man's dominion seems a futile dream and a hope that mocks, but 'we see Jesus,' ascended up on high, and in Him we too are 'made to sit together in heavenly places.' 'The Breaker is gone up before them. Their King shall pass before them, and the Lord at the head of them.'

There is yet another aspect in which our Lord's Ascension bears on our hopes for the future, namely, as connected with His coming again. In that respect, too, the contrast of Elijah's translation may serve to emphasise the truth. Prophecy, indeed, in its latest voice, spoke of sending Elijah the prophet before the coming of the day of the Lord, and Rabbinical legends delighted to tell how he had been carried to the Garden of Eden, whence he would come again, in Israel's sorest need. But the prophecy had no thought of a personal

reappearance, and the dreams are only dreams such as we find in the legendary history of many nations. As Elisha recrossed the Jordan, he bore with him only a mantle and a memory, not a hope.

‘Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven.’ How grand is the use in these mighty words of the name Jesus, the name that speaks of His true humanity, with all its weakness, limitations, and sorrow, with all its tenderness and brotherhood! The man who died and rose again, has gone up on high. ‘He will so come as He has gone.’ ‘So’—that is to say, personally, corporeally, visibly, on clouds, perhaps to that very spot, ‘and His feet shall stand in that day upon the Mount of Olives.’ Thus Scripture teaches us ever to associate together the departure and the coming of the Lord, and always when we meditate on His Ascension to prepare a place for us, to think of His real presence with us through the ages, and of His coming again to receive us to Himself.

That parting on Olivet cannot be the end. Such a leave-taking is the prophecy of happy greetings and an inseparable reunion. The King has gone to receive a kingdom, and to return. Memory and hope coalesce, as we think of Him who is passed into the heavens, and the heart of the Church has to cherish at once the glad thought that its Head and helper has entered within the veil, and the still more joyous one, which lightens the days of separation and widowhood, that the Lord will come again.

So let us take our share in the ‘great joy’ with which the disciples returned to Jerusalem, left like sheep in

the midst of wolves as they were, and 'let us set our affection on things above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God.'

ELIJAH'S TRANSLATION AND ELISHA'S DEATHBED

'And Elisha saw it, and he cried, My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof.'—2 KINGS ii. 12.

'... And Joash, the King of Israel, came down unto him, and wept over his face, and said, O my father, my father, the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof.'—2 KINGS xiii. 14.

The scenes and the speakers are strangely different in these two incidents. The one scene is that mysterious translation on the further bank of the Jordan, when a mortal was swept up to heaven in a fiery whirlwind, and the other is an ordinary sick chamber, where an old man was lying, with the life slowly ebbing out of him. The one speaker is the successor of the great prophet, on whom his spirit in 'a large measure fell; the other, an idolatrous king, young, headstrong, who had despised the latter prophet's teaching while he lived, but was now for the moment awed into something like seriousness and reverence by his death.

Now the remarkable thing is that this unworthy monarch should have come to the dying prophet, and should have strengthened and cheered him by the quotation of his own words, spoken so long ago, as if he would say to him, 'All that thou didst mean when thou didst stand there in rapturous adoration, watching the ascending Elijah, is as true about thee, lying dying here, of a common and lingering sickness. My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof.' Seen or unseen, these were present. The

reality was the same, though the appearances were so different.

I. We have in the first case the chariot and horsemen seen.

To feel the force of the exclamation on the lips of Joash, we must try to make clear to ourselves what its original meaning was. What did Elisha intend when he stood beyond Jordan, and in wonder and awe exclaimed, 'The chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof'?

It does not seem to me that the interpretation of the words now in favour is at all satisfactory. It tells us that the expression is to be taken as in apposition with the exclamation 'My father, my father'; and that both the one phrase and the other mean—Elijah! Yet what a preposterous and strange metaphor it would be to call a man a chariot and pair, or a chariot and cavalry! It seems to me that the very statement of this explanation, in plain English, condemns it as untenable. It is surely less probable that Elisha in that exclamation was describing Elijah than that he was speaking of that wondrous chariot of fire and horses of fire that had come between him and his master, and that his exclamation was one of surprised adoration as he gazed with wide-opened eyes on the burning angel-hosts, and saw his master mysteriously able to bear that fire, ringed round by these flaming squadrons, possibly standing unscathed on the floor of the chariot, and swept with it and all the celestial pomp, by the whirlwind, into heaven.

But why should he say 'the chariot of *Israel*'? I think we take for granted too readily that '*Israel*' here means the nation. You will remember that that name was not originally that of the nation, but of its

progenitor and founder, given to Jacob as the consequence and record of that mysterious wrestling by the brook. And I think we get a nobler signification for the words before us if, instead of applying the name to the nation, we apply it here to the individual. When Elijah and Elisha crossed Jordan they were not far from the spot where that name was given to Jacob, 'the supplanter,' whom discipline and communion with God had elevated into Israel. And they were near another of the sites consecrated by his history, the place where, just before the change of his name, the angels of God met him and 'he called the name of the place Mahanaim.' That means '*the two camps*,' the one, Jacob's defenceless company of women and children, the other, their celestial guards.

It seems reasonable to suppose that, in all probability, a reminiscence of that old story of the manifestation of the armed angels of God as the defenders and servants of His children broke from Elisha's lips. As he looks upon that strange appearance of the chariot and horses of fire that parted him and his friend, he sees once more 'the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof,' the reappearance of the shining armies whose presence had of old declared that 'the angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear Him, and delivereth them.' And now the same hosts in their immortal youth, unweakened by the ages which have brought earthly warriors to dust and their swords to rust, are flaming and flashing there in the midday sun. What was their errand, and why did they appear? They came, as God's messengers, to bear His servant to His presence. They attested the commission and devotion of the prophet. Their agency was needful to lift a mortal to skies not native to him. Strange that

a body of flesh should be able to endure that fiery splendour! Somewhere in the course of that upward movement must this man, who was caught up to meet the Lord in the air, have been 'changed.' His guards of honour were not only for tokens of his prophetic work, but for witnesses of the unseen world and in some sort pledges, suited to that stage of revelation, of life and immortality.

How striking is the contrast between the translation of Elijah and the Ascension of Christ! He who ascended up where He was before needed no whirlwind, nor chariot of fire, nor extraneous power to elevate Him to His home. Calmly, slowly, as borne upwards by indwelling affinity with heaven, He floated thither with outstretched hands of blessing. The servant angels did not need to surround Him, but, clad no longer in fiery armour, but 'in white apparel,' the emblem of purity and peace, they stood by the disciples and comforted them with hope. Elijah was carried to heaven. Christ went. The angels disappeared with the prophet and left Elisha to grieve alone. They lingered here after Christ had gone, and turned tears into rainbows flashing with the hues of hope.

II. We have in our second text the chariot and horsemen present though unseen.

We are now in a position to appreciate the meaning of Joash's repetition to Elisha of his own words, spoken under such different circumstances.

Elisha was by no means so great a prophet as Elijah. His work had not been so conspicuous, his character was not so strong, though perhaps more gentle. No such lofty and large influence had been granted to him as had been given to the fiery Tishbite to wield, nor did he leave his mark so deep upon the history of the

times or upon the memory of succeeding generations. But such as it had been given him to be he had been. He was a continuer, not an originator. There had been a long period during which he appears to have lived in absolute retirement, exercising no prophetic functions. We never hear of him during the interval between the anointing of Jehu to the Israelitish monarchy and the time of his own death, and that period must have extended over nearly fifty years. After all these years of eclipse and seclusion he was lying dying somewhere in a corner, and the king, young but impressible, although, on the whole, not reliable nor good, came down to the prophet's home, and there, standing by the pallet of the dying man, repeated the words, so strangely reminiscent of a very different event—'My father, my father! the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof!'

And what does that exclamation mean? Two things. One is this, that the angels of the Divine Presence are with us as truly, in life, when unseen as if seen. So far as we know, it was only to Elisha that the vision had been granted of that chariot of fire and horses of fire. We read that at Elijah's translation on the other side of Jordan, and consequently at no great distance off, there stood a company of the sons of the prophets from Jericho to see what would happen, but we do not read that they did see. On the contrary, they were inclined to believe that Elijah had been caught up and flung away somewhere on the mountains, and that it was worth while to organise search-parties to go after him. It was only Elisha that saw, and Elijah did not know whether he would see or not, for he said to him, 'If thou shalt see me when I am taken from thee, then' thy desire shall be granted.

The angels of God are visible to the eyes that are fit to see them; and those eyes can always see them. It does not matter whether in a miracle or in a common event—it does not matter whether on the stones by the banks of Jordan or in a close sick chamber, they are visible for those who, by pure hearts and holy desires, have had their vision purged from the intrusive vulgarities and dazzling brightnesses of this poor, petty present, and can therefore see beneath all the apparent the real that blazes behind it.

The scenes at Jordan and in the death-chamber are not the only times in Elisha's life when we read of these chariots and horses of fire. There was another incident in his career in which the same phrase occurs. Once his servant was terrified at the sight of a host compassing the little city where Elisha and he were, with horses and chariots, and came to his master with alarm and despair, crying, 'Alas! my master, how shall we do?' The prophet answered with superb calmness, 'Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them. . . . Lord, I pray Thee, open his eyes that he may see. And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw; and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha.' They had always been there, though no one saw them. They were there when no one but Elisha saw them. They were no more there when the young man saw them than they had been before. They did not cease to be there when the film came over his eyes again, and the common round took him back to the trivialities of daily life.

And so from the mouth of this not very devout king the prophet was reminded of his own ancient experiences, and invited to feel that, unseen or seen, the

solemn forms stood 'bright-harnessed,' and strong, 'in order serviceable,' ranged about him for his defence and blessing.

And are they not round about us? If a man can but look into the realities of things, will he see only the work of men and of the forces of nature? Will there not be—far more visible as they are far more real than any of these—the forces of the Eternal Presence and ever operative Will of our Father in Heaven? We need not discuss the personality of angels. An angel is the embodiment of the will and energy of God, and we have that will and energy working for us, whether there are any angel persons about us or not. Scripture declares that there are, and that they serve us. We may be sure that if only we will honestly try to purge our eyes from the illusions and temptations of 'things seen and temporal,' the mountain or the sick chamber will 'be to us equally full of the angel forms of our defenders and companions.

Do we see them for ourselves; and, not less important, do we, like Elisha, lying there on his deathbed, help else blind men to see them, and make every one that comes beside us, even if he be as little impressible and as little devout as this king Joash was, recognise that in our chambers there sit, and round our lives there flutter and sing, sweet and strong angel wings and voices? Will anybody, looking at you, be constrained to feel that with and around you are the angels of God?

Still further, another cognate application of these great words is that one which is more directly suggested by their quotation by Joash. It does not matter in what way the end of life comes. The reality is the same to all devout men; though one be swept to

heaven in a whirlwind, and another fade slowly away in old age, or 'fall sick of the sickness wherewith he should die.' Each is taken to God in a chariot of fire. The means are of little moment, the fact remains the same, however diverse may be the methods of its accomplishment. The road is the same; the companions the same, the impelling—I was going to say the locomotive—power, is the same, and the goal is the same.

Of Enoch we read, 'He was not, for God took him.' Of Elijah we read, 'He went up in a whirlwind to heaven.' Of Elisha we read, 'He died and they buried him.' And of all three—the two who were translated that they should not see death, and the one who died like the rest of us—it is equally true that 'God took' them, and that they were taken to Him. So for ourselves and for our dear ones we may look forward or backward, to deathbeds of weariness, of lingering sickness, of long pain and suffering, or of swift dissolution, and piercing beneath the surface may see the blessed central reality and thankfully feel that Death, too, is God's angel, who 'does His commandments, hearkening to the voice of God's word' when in his dark hearse he carries us hence.

GENTLENESS SUCCEEDING STRENGTH

'He took up also the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and went back, and stood by the bank of Jordan; 14. And he took the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and smote the waters, and said, Where is the Lord God of Elijah? and when he also had smitten the waters, they parted hither and thither: and Elisha went over. 15. And when the sons of the prophets which were to view at Jericho saw him, they said, The spirit of Elijah doth rest on Elisha. And they came to meet him, and bowed themselves to the ground before him. 16. And they said unto him, Behold now, there be with thy servants fifty strong men; let them go, we pray thee, and seek thy master: lest peradventure the Spirit of the Lord hath taken him up, and cast him upon some mountain, or into some valley. And he said, Ye shall not send. 17. And when they urged him till he was ashamed, he said, Send. They sent therefore fifty men; and they sought three days, but found him not. 18. And when they came again to him, (for he tarried at Jericho,) he said unto them, Did I not say unto you, Go not? 19. And the men of the city said

unto Elisha, Behold, I pray thee, the situation of this city is pleasant, as my lord seeth : but the water is naught, and the ground barren. 20. And he said, Bring me a new cruse, and put salt therein. And they brought it to him. 21. And he went forth unto the spring of the waters, and cast the salt in there, and said, Thus saith the Lord, I have healed these waters; there shall not be from thence any more death or barren land. 22. So the waters were healed unto this day, according to the saying of Elisha which he spake.—2 KINGS II. 13-22.

THE independent activity of Elisha begins with verse 13. How short the gap between the two prophets, and how easily filled it is! Not the greatest are indispensable. God lays aside one tool, but only to take up another. He has inexhaustible stores. The work goes on, though the workers change, and there is little time for mere mourning, and none for idle sorrow. Elisha's first miracle is almost an experiment. The mantle which lay at his feet had been thrown over him by Elijah when he was called to his service, and it was now a token that office and power had devolved on him. His first steps tread closely in Elijah's track; as those of wise and humble men, called to higher work, will mostly do. The repetition of the miracle by the same means, and the invocation of the Lord as the 'God of Elijah,'—a new name, to be set by the side of 'the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob'—express the humility which seeks to shelter itself behind the example of its mighty predecessor. The form of the invocation as a question indicates that Elisha had not yet attained certainty as to his power, as not yet having proved it. 'Where is the Lord God of Elijah?' is not the question of unbelief, but neither is it the voice of full confidence, which asks no such question, because it knows Him to be with it. It is the cry, 'Oh that Thou mayest be here, even with unworthy me! and art Thou not here?' The faith was real, though young, and clouded with some film of doubt. But, being real, it was answered; and it was because of Elisha's trust, not Elijah's mantle, that

the waters parted. God will listen to a man pleading that ancient deeds may be repeated to-day, and, by answering the cry addressed to Him as the God of saints and martyrs of old, will embolden us to cry to Him as our very own God. We may learn from that first half-tentative miracle the spirit in which men should take up the work of those that are gone, the lowliness fitting for beginners, the wisdom of seeking to graft new work on the old stock, the encouragement from remembering the divine wonders through His servants in the past, and the true way to assure ourselves of our God-given power; namely, by attempting great things for Him, in dependence on His promise.

The miracle was wrought partly for Elisha, and partly for others who were to acknowledge his authority. These sons of the prophets, who stood on the eastern bank of Jordan, had probably not been witnesses of the translation, even if their position commanded a view of the spot. Purer eyes and more kindred spirits than theirs were needed for that. But they saw Elisha returning alone, and the waters parting before him, and, no doubt, as he came nearer, would recognise what he bore in his hand—Elijah's well-known mantle. They hasten to recognise him as the head of the prophets, and their acknowledgment accurately expresses his place and work. Elijah's spirit rests on him, even though the two men and their careers are very different, and in some respects opposite. Elisha is distinctly secondary to Elijah. He is in no sense an originator, either of fresh revelations or of new impulses to obedience. He but carries on what Elijah had begun, inherits a work, and is Elijah's 'Timothy' and 'son in the faith.' The same Spirit was on him, though the form of his character and gifts was in

strong contrast to the stormier genius of his mightier predecessor. Elisha had no such work as Elijah—no foot-to-foot and hand-to-hand duels with murderous kings or queens; no single-handed efforts to stop a nation from rushing down a steep place into the sea; no fiery energy; no bursts of despair. He moved among kings and courts as an honoured guest and trusted counsellor. He did not dwell apart, like Elijah, the strong son of the desert; but, born in the fertile valley of the Jordan, he lived a life 'kindly with his kind,' and his delights were with the sons of men. His miracles are mostly works of mercy and gentleness, relieving wants and sicknesses, drying tears and giving back dear ones to mourners. He is as complete a contrast to his stern, solitary, forceful predecessor, as the 'still small voice' was to the roar of the wind or the crackling hiss of the flames.

But, nevertheless, 'there are diversities of operations, but the same God.' It is well to remember that one type of excellence does not exhaust the possibilities of goodness, nor the resources of the inspiring Spirit. The comparative merits of strength and gentleness will always be variously estimated; but God's work needs them both, and both may join hands as serving the same Lord in diverse ways, which are all needed. We should seek to widen our discernment to the extent of the rich variety of forms of good and of service which God gives. Elijah and Elisha, Paul and Timothy, Luther and Melancthon, are all His servants. Well is it when the strong can recognise the power of the gentle, and the gentle can discern the tenderness of the strong, and when each is forward to say of the other, 'He worketh the work of the Lord, as I also do.'

The search after Elijah, insisted on by the sons of the

prophets, is of importance only as showing their low thoughts and Elisha's gentle spirit. He is their head, but he holds the reins loosely. Fancy anybody 'urging' Elijah 'till he was ashamed'! The shame would very soon have mantled the cheek of the urger. But though, no doubt, Elisha would tell what had happened, these 'prophets' only think that Elijah has been miraculously borne somewhither, as he had been before, and seem to have no notion of what has really happened. How hard it is to heave heavy men up to any height of spiritual vision! How vulgar minds always take refuge in the most commonplace explanations that they can find of high truths! 'Gone up to heaven! Not he! He is lying, living or dead, in some gorge or on some hillside. Let us go and look for him!' There is nothing on which some people pride themselves more than upon being practical—which generally means prosaic, and often means blind to God's greatest deeds. To go scouring wady and mountain for a man who had been taken up into heaven was practical common sense indeed! But Elisha's gentleness is to be noted. He let them have their own way. Often that is the only plan for convincing people of their errors. And, when the fifty scouts come back empty-handed, all he says is a quiet 'Did I no say unto you, Go not?' 'The servant of the Lord must not strive,' but 'in meekness' instruct 'those that oppose themselves'; and the effectual instruction is often to let them take their own course.

The miracle of healing the waters is of the beneficent kind usual with Elisha, inaugurates his course with blessing, and typifies the healing power which God through him would exert on men. Jericho had been recently rebuilt in spite of the curse against its builders. The bitterness of the spring seems to have been part of

the malediction; for men would not be so foolish as to rebuild a city which had only impure water to depend on. However that may be, the main lesson of the miracle, beyond its revelation of the spirit of gentle compassion in Elisha, is the symbolical one. The new cruse and the salt are emblems of the divine gift which cleanses the human heart. Salt is an emblem of purification, and its emblematic meaning prevails here over its natural properties; for the last thing to cure a brackish spring was to put salt into it. The very inadequacy, as well as inappropriateness, of the remedy, points the miraculous and symbolical character of the whole. A jar full of salt could do little to a gushing fountain. But it figured the cleansing power which God will bring to bear on us, if we will; and it taught the great truth that sin must be cleansed at the fountain-head in the heart, not half a mile down the stream, in the deeds. Put the salt in the spring, and the outflow will be sweet.

WHEN THE OIL FLOWS

'And it came to pass, when the vessels were full, that she said unto her son, Bring me yet a vessel. And he said unto her, There is not a vessel more. And the oil stayed.'—2 KINGS iv. 8.

THE series of miracles ascribed to Elisha are very unlike most of the wonderful works of even the Old Testament, and still more unlike those of the New. For about a great many of them there seems to have been no special purpose, either doctrinal or otherwise, but simply the relief of trivial and transient distresses. This story, from which my text is taken, is one of that sort. One of the sons of the prophets had died in Shunem. He left a widow and two little

children. The creditor, according to the Mosaic law, had the right, which he was about to put in practice, of taking the children to be bondmen. And so the penniless, helpless woman comes to Elisha, as a kind of deliverer-general from all sorts of distresses, and tells him her pitiful tale. He asks her what she wants him to do, and she has no counsel to give. Then the thing to do strikes *him*. He asks what she has in the house. It was a poor, bare hovel of a place. There was not anything in it save a pot of oil, which was all her property. He sends her to borrow vessels, of all sorts and sizes. He takes the pot of oil, and shuts the door. Then she sets the two boys fetching and carrying; and herself taking up the one possession that she has, in faith she pours; and dish after dish is filled, and still she pours; and they were all filled, and she kept on pouring. Then she said, 'Bring some more'; and the boys answered, 'There are not any more,' so then the oil stopped.

There was no very special reason for all this. It is not at all like most Biblical miracles. I do not suppose it had any symbolical intention; but I venture to do a little gentle violence to the incident, and to see in the staying of the oil when no more vessels were brought to be filled, a lesson addressed to us all, and it is this: God keeps giving Himself as long as we bring that into which He can pour Himself. And when we stop bringing, He stops giving.

Now, if I may venture to be fanciful for once, let me tell you of three vessels that we have to bring if we would have the oil of the Divine Spirit poured into us.

I. The vessel of desire.

God can give us a great many things that we do not wish, but He cannot give us His best gift, and that is

Himself, unless we desire it. He never forces His company on any man, and if we do not wish for Him He cannot give us Himself, His Spirit, or the gifts of His Spirit. For instance, He cannot make a man wise if he does not wish to be instructed. He cannot make a man holy if he has no aspiration after holiness. He cannot save a man from his sins if the man holds on to his sin with both hands, like some shellfish with its claws when you try to drag it out of its cleft in the rock. He cannot give the oil unless we bring the vessels of our hearts opened by our desires.

If God could He would. 'Ye have not because ye ask not.' But we are never to forget that God is not led to begin His giving because we petition Him, but that the infinitude of His stores, and the endless, changeless, unmotivated, perfect love of His heart, make self-communication—I was going to use a very strong word, and I do not know that it is too strong—necessary to the blessedness of the blessed God, and, long before we ever thought of Him, or sought anything from Him, there was pouring out from Him all the fulness of His love: just as we may conceive of the sunshine raying out before the orbs that were to circle round it had been completely shaped, but were still diffused and nebulous.

But, while God is always giving, our capacity to receive determines the degree of our individual possession of Him. Or, to put it in the plainest words—we have as much of God as we can take in; and the principal factor in settling how much we can take is—how much we wish. Measure the reality and intensity of desire, and you measure capacity. As the atmosphere rushes into every vacuum, or as the sea runs up into and fills every sinuosity of the shore, so wherever a

heart opens, and the unbroken coast-line is indented, as it were, by desire, in rushes the tide of the divine gifts. You have God in the measure in which you desire Him.

Only remember that that desire which brings God must be more than a feeble, fleeting wish. Wishing is one thing; *willing* is quite another. Lazily wishing and strenuously desiring are two entirely different postures of mind; the former gets nothing and the latter gets everything, gets God, and with God all that God can bring.

But the wish must not only rise to intensity and earnestness, but it must be steadfast. Suppose these two little boys of the widow had held their vessels below the spout of the oil-pot with tremulous hands, while they looked away at something else, sometimes keeping the vessels right under, and sometimes shifting them on one side, it would have been slow work filling the unsteadily held vessels. So it is in regard to receiving God's best gift. Our desires must be unwavering. A cup held by a shaking hand will spill its contents, or will never receive them. 'Let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord.' The steadfast wish is the wish that is answered.

Is it not a strange indifference to our true good that we who have learned, as most of us have learned only too well, that in this world to wish is not to have, should turn away from the possibility that lies before us each, of passing from this disappointing world of vain longings into a region where we cannot wish anything that we do not get? There is only one thing about which it is true that, if you want, and as much as you want, you will have; and that thing is found when we turn away our wishes from the false, fleeting, and surface satisfactions of earth, and fasten them upon

God, 'Who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we . . . think.' Wish for Him, and you have what you have wished. Wish for anything else, and you may have it or you may not, but depend upon it the fish is never half as big when it is out of the water as it felt to be when it was tugging at the hook.

II. Another vessel that we have to bring is the vessel of our expectancy.

Desire is one thing; confident anticipation that the desire will be fulfilled is quite another. And the two do not certainly go together anywhere except in this one region, and there they do go, linked arm in arm. For whatsoever, in the highest of all regions, we wish, we have the right without presumption to believe that we shall receive. Expectation, like desire, opens the heart.

There are some expectations, even in lower regions, that fulfil themselves. Doctors will tell you that a very large part of the curative power of their medicine depends upon the patient's anticipation of recovery. If a man expects to die when he takes to his bed, the chances are that he will die; and if a man expects to get better, Death will have a fight before it conquers him. There are hundreds of cases, in all departments of life, where he who sets himself to a task with assured persuasion that he is going to do such and such a thing will do it. 'Screw your courage to the sticking-place, and we'll not fail,' said the heroine in the tragedy; and there is a great truth in her fierce encouragement.

All these illustrations fall far beneath the Christian aspect of the thought that what we expect from God we receive. That is only another way of putting 'According to thy faith be it unto thee.' It is exactly what Jesus Christ said when He promised, 'Whatsoever

things ye ask when ye stand praying, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them.'

I am afraid that a great many of us often have expectations fainter than desires; and that we should be very much surprised if the thing that we ask for, in the prayers that we so often repeat by rote, were granted to us. You will hear men praying for holiness, for clean hearts, for progress in the Christian life, for a hundred other such blessings. They do not expect that anything is going to come in consequence, and they would be mightily at a loss what to do with the gift if it did come. The absence of expectancy in our public petitions is to me one of the saddest features in the Christian life of this day. If you expect little, you will get little; and we do expect far less than we ought. We cannot raise our confident expectations too high; for 'He is able to do for us exceeding abundantly above all that we ask' as well as 'think.' The Apostle has set the limit of our expectations, in the same context, and here it is: 'That we may be filled with all the fulness of God.' There are two limits: one is the boundless illimitableness of God's perfection, and the possibilities of our possession of Him are not exhausted until we have reached that infinite completeness. But then, there is a practical, working limit for each of us; and that is—what do you desire? and what do you expect? God can give more than we can ask or think, but He cannot at the moment give more than we expect or desire.

True, the vessels that we bring to be filled with the oil are not like the vessels that the fatherless boys brought. These were of a definite capacity; and the little cup when it was filled was filled, and there was an end of it. But the vessels that we bring are elastic,

and widen out. The more that is put into them the more they can hold, so that there is no bound to the capacity of a heart for the reception and inrush of God; and there will not be a bound through all the ages of a growing possession of Him in eternity. But for to-day, desire and expectancy determine the measure of the gift.

III. Lastly, one more vessel that we have to bring is obedience.

‘If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine.’ *There* is one case of the general principle that wishes and anticipations are all right and well, but unless they are backed up and verified by conduct, even wishes and anticipations will not bring God’s gift. For it is possible for a man who, in his better moments of devotion, has some desires after a loftier range of goodness and a completer conformity to God than he ordinarily has, to rise from his knees and rush into the world, and there live in some lust, or uncleanness, or vice, or indulgence, or absorption in the cares of this life, in such a way as that desires and anticipations shall vanish. If we fill our vessels full, before we take them to the source of supply, with all manner of baser liquids, there will be no room for the oil. We may contradict and stifle our desires by our conduct, and by it make our expectations perfectly impossible to be fulfilled. Are our daily doings of such a nature as that the Spirit of God, which is symbolised by the oil, can come into our hearts; or are we quenching and grieving Him so that He

‘Can but listen at the gate

And hear the household jar within’?

Desire, Expectancy, and Obedience — these three

must never be separated if we are to receive the gift of Himself, which God delights and waits to give. All spiritual possessions and powers grow by use, even as exercised muscles are strengthened, and unused ones tend to be atrophied. It is possible, by neglect of God and of the gift given to us, to incur the stern sentence passed on the slothful servant—'Take it from him.' By disobedience and negligence we choke the channel through which God's gifts can flow to us. So, brethren, bring these three vessels, and you will not go away with them empty. 'Open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it.'

A MIRACLE NEEDING EFFORT

'So she went, and came unto the man of God to mount Carmel. And it came to pass, when the man of God saw her afar off, that he said to Gehazi his servant, Behold, yonder is that Shunammite: 26. Run now, I pray thee, to meet her, and say unto her, Is it well with thee? is it well with thy husband? is it well with the child? And she answered, It is well. 27. And when she came to the man of God to the hill, she caught him by the feet: but Gehazi came near to thrust her away. And the man of God said, Let her alone; for her soul is vexed within her: and the Lord hath hid it from me, and hath not told me. 28. Then she said, Did I desire a son of my lord? did I not say, Do not deceive me? 29. Then he said to Gehazi, Gird up thy loins, and take my staff in thine hand, and go thy way: if thou meet any man, salute him not; and if any salute thee, answer him not again: and lay my staff upon the face of the child. 30. And the mother of the child said, As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. And he arose, and followed her. 31. And Gehazi passed on before them, and laid the staff upon the face of the child; but there was neither voice, nor hearing. Wherefore he went again to meet him, and told him, saying, The child is not awaked. 32. And when Elisha was come into the house, behold, the child was dead, and laid upon his bed. 33. He went in therefore, and shut the door upon them twain, and prayed unto the Lord. 34. And he went up, and lay upon the child, and put his mouth upon his mouth, and his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands: and he stretched himself upon the child: and the flesh of the child waxed warm. 35. Then he returned, and walked in the house to and fro: and went up, and stretched himself upon him: and the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes. 36. And he called Gehazi, and said, Call this Shunammite. So he called her. And when she was come in unto him, he said, Take up thy son. 37. Then she went in, and fell at his feet, and bowed herself to the ground, and took up her son, and went out.'—2 KINGS iv. 25-37.

THE story of Elisha is almost entirely a record of his miracles, and the story of his miracles is almost entirely a record of deeds of beneficence. Exception has

been taken to it on the ground of the strange accumulation of supernatural works, which have been said to make it like some mediæval saint's legend. But why should it not be true that, after Elijah had proclaimed the truth, his successor's function was to enforce it chiefly by his acts, and to seek to draw Israel back to God by 'the cords of love' and the gentle compulsion of mercies? The careful consideration of the work of the two prophets makes the peculiarities of Elisha's perfectly intelligible. This story of the great lady at Shunem, her joy over her only child and his piteous death 'on her knees,' is one of the tenderest and sweetest pages in the history. Late won and early lost, the poor boy lies pale and dead on Elisha's bed at Shunem, while the mother hurries across the plain of Jezreel to Carmel,—a distance of some fifteen or sixteen miles,—where Elisha was then living, probably near the place of Elijah's sacrifice. This passage begins with her approach.

I. Note first the meeting (verses 25-28). Somewhere on the slopes of Carmel, commanding a view of the plain stretching away in the blue distance eastward, sat the prophet. His eye was keen, though probably he was now old, and he recognised the lady at a distance, as she rode swiftly towards the mountain. He appears to have suspected that this unusual visit meant some calamity, and his gentle heart went out towards his hostess and friend. Gehazi could not get back sooner than she could come, but sympathy could not sit passive and watch her approach. So the instinctively despatched message beautifully witnesses the prophet's keen affection, and, as it were, the eager leap of his sympathy. So swift and ready to flash into act is the fellow-feeling of the Highest with the

sorrows of us all; so should be the compassion of each with another. The higher in gifts or office in the kingdom a man is, the more is he bound to carry his sympathy in an outstretched hand. It is worth very little when it comes slowly. It is priceless when it runs to meet the mourner before she speaks.

The detailed question put into Gehazi's mouth describes the circle within which this woman's heart moved,—her husband, her child, herself. If these were well, nothing could be very ill; if ill, nothing could be well. But the message, which came so warm from Elisha's lips, had been cooled on the road, and sounded formal from Gehazi. It is hard for selfish indifference to carry tender words without freezing them. The bearer of sympathy must be sympathetic. As Gehazi spoiled Elisha's message, so we Christians too often do our Master's, and cool it down to our own temperature. The fact that Gehazi had done so is suggested by the curt answer, 'Peace!' It is often quoted as the language of resignation, but it seems much rather to be evasion of the question, and that because her sorrow shrank from unveiling itself to the questioner. Nothing makes grief dumb so surely as prying and yet indifferent intrusion. A tenderer hand than Gehazi's is needed to unlock the sad secret of that burdened breast.

It was perhaps partly pique at her silencing him, and partly mere unfeeling attention to 'propriety,' which made the servant wish to check the convulsive grasp of the feet, which the master allowed. Underlings are more careful of what they suppose to be their superior's dignity than he is. Much is permitted to love and sorrow, by a prophet, which would be repressed by smaller men. 'Her soul is bitter within

her' pardons much, and only unfeeling critics will be punctilious in dealing with even the extravagances of grief. But Elisha had another reason than pity. He wished to know her pain, and therefore he let her cling to his feet; for only there would she find her tongue. Does there not shine through the figure of the gentle prophet the image of the gentler Christ, who will not have the poorest and foulest spurned from His feet, though it be 'a woman who was a sinner,' and lets us come as close to Him as we will, even to hide our faces on His breast, that we may pour out all our sorrows and sins to Him?

The limitations of the prophet's knowledge he frankly owns. How much better would it have been for the Church if its teachers had been more willing to copy his modesty, and said about a great many things, 'The Lord hath hid it from me'!

The mother's answer is indeed the cry of a 'bitter' heart. Its abrupt questions and its reticence as to the child's death are pathetically true to nature, and sound yet across all these centuries as if the bitter cry were for a grief of to-day. 'Did I desire a son?' She upbraids Elisha and Elisha's God for having forced on her an unasked blessing. 'Did I not say, Do not deceive me?' She did (verse 16); and she upbraids Elisha again for a worse deceit than she had meant then, by mocking her with a gift which was wrenched from her hands so suddenly and soon. How many a sad heart is to-day tempted to raise this cry of anguish! And how patient is Elisha with wild words, and how he discerns, beneath the apparent rough reproach, the misery which it implies and the petition which it veils! Elisha's Lord is no less tender in His judgment of our hasty, whirlwind words, when our hearts are sore;

and if only we speak them to Him and cling to His feet, He translates them into the petitions which they mean, and is swift to answer the meaning and pass by the sound of our bitter cry.

II. We note the ineffectual experiment of the staff (verses 29-31). The supposition that Gehazi was sent in such haste with the hope that the touch of the staff might bring back life, is dismissed as 'impossible' by most commentators, who have therefore some difficulty in saying what he was sent for. Some of the Rabbis answered, 'To prevent putrefaction,' which would set in soon on that harvest day. Others say that the intention was to 'prevent more life escaping from him.' But 'dead' is not usually supposed to be an adjective admitting of comparison. Others find the reason in the wish to deliver Israel from the superstitious veneration of such things as the staff, by showing that it was powerless. But verse 31 plainly implies that the result of Gehazi's attempt was not what had been expected. Why need there be any hesitation in taking the natural meaning, and supposing that Elisha sent his servant quickly, 'if peradventure' the touch of his staff might suffice, and followed in person, because he did not know whether it would. There is nothing unworthy of a prophet who had just confessed his ignorance in the supposition. His unobtrusive spirit delighted to hide its power behind material vehicles, as is seen in most of his miracles; and, if he remembered how he himself, in his early days, had parted the waters with his master's cloak, he might think it possible that his servant should work a miracle with his staff.

The Shunemite quotes his own words on that far-off day; and perhaps she was reminded of them by

perceiving the analogy of the two incidents. But her clinging to Elisha shows her doubt of the success of the attempt; and she was right. Why did the staff fail? Perhaps because of its bearer. Gehazi always appears unfavourably, and Elisha's staff loses its power in such hands. The mightiest instruments are weak when selfishness and coldness wield them. An unworthy minister can make the Gospel itself impotent. It is an awful thing to carry 'the rod of Thy strength' and to hinder its exerting its energy. But possibly the non-success of the attempt was meant to teach Elisha and us that miracles of life-giving are not to be wrought so easily, but need the effort of the prophet himself. We cannot delegate the work of God, and no sending of others will do instead of going ourselves. Such things are not achieved without much personal toil, pains, and self-sacrifice.

III. So we come to the last step, the communication of life (verses 32-37). It was noon when the child died. The mother's journey would take three or four hours, and the return at least as much. It would then be dark when the two reached her desolate home. She had laid the boy on Elisha's bed, as if even that brought her some comfort. It is difficult to say whether 'them twain' (verse 33) means him and the mother, or him and the child; but the expression of the next verse, 'went up,' suggests that the prayer with shut door was in the lower part of the house, and that the mother's cry was joined to the prophet's petitions. Such prayer is the true preparation for such a miracle. Beautiful consideration, born of sympathy, led him to shut out curious onlookers, and then to go up alone to the little chamber where that pale, tiny corpse lay. No eye but a mother's could have seen what followed

without profanation; and a mother's heart would have been torn by hopes and fears if she had seen.

The actual miracle is remarkable for two peculiarities—the effort required and the slowness of the process. Of course, there is a profound and beautiful use to be made of the prophet's action in laying himself upon the dead child, mouth to mouth, and hand to hand, if we regard it as symbolic of that closeness of approach to our nature, dead in sins, which the Lord of life makes in His incarnation and in His continual drawing near. It is His own life which Jesus imparts, and it is imparted because He comes near and touches us. It is the warmth of His own heart which passes into those who live by derivation of life from Him. And Elisha may well stand as symbol of Jesus in this miracle. But besides that use of the narrative, which is no mere fanciful playing with it, we should also note the difference between the prophet and Christ in their miracles. Jesus raises the dead by His bare word. His expressed will is all-sufficient. Elisha prays, and then puts forth somewhat prolonged efforts, from which at first there is no effect, and which drain him of force, so that he is obliged to pause and leave the chamber, and gather himself together for a renewal of them. The ease of the one sets the difficulty of the other in a strong light. And the life which came back with a rush, in full stream, at Christ's bidding, comes only by degrees at Elisha's prayer and work. The one worker is the Lord of life, who speaks and it is done; the other is but the channel of power, and the appearance of effort and gradualness in result is owing to the narrowness of the channel, not to the inadequacy of the power.

In all Elisha's gentleness and lowliness there is yet a

certain dignity as God's prophet ; and it was not fitting that he should come from the scene of such a miracle with the glow of it upon him, to seek for the mother. So he summons her by Gehazi, and then, with beautiful delicacy, leaves her to go alone into the chamber. None are to see the transports of her joy, not even the author of it. How beautiful, too, are the quiet words, 'Take up thy son'! She has no words; but, for all answer, comes close to him (there is no 'in' in verse 37), and once again, but with what different feelings, clasps his feet. Not even Gehazi, or any other stickler for propriety, has the heart to thrust her back this time. The story draws a curtain over that meeting in the prophet's chamber. Sad hearts who have vainly longed for such a moment, can fancy the rapture. But the day will come, not here, but in the upper chamber, when parted ones shall clasp each other again; and many a mourner shall hear Jesus say from the throne what He once said from the Cross, 'Woman, behold thy son; son, behold thy mother.'

NAAMAN'S WRATH

'And Elisha sent a messenger unto Naaman, saying, Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean. 11. But Naaman was wroth, and went away.'—2 KINGS v. 10, 11.

THESE two figures are significant of much beyond themselves. Elisha the prophet is the bearer of a divine cure. Naaman, the great Syrian noble, is stricken with the disease that throughout the Old Testament is treated as a parable of sin and death. He was the commander-in-chief of the army of Damascus, high in favour at Ben-hadad's court; his reputation

and renown were on every tongue, *but* he was a leper. There is a 'but' in every fortune, as there is a 'but' in every character.

So he comes to the prophet's humble home in Samaria, and we find him waiting, a suppliant at the gate, with his cavalcade of attendants, and a present worth many thousands of pounds in our English money.

How does the prophet receive his distinguished visitor? In all the rest of his actions we find Elisha gentle, accessible, forgetful of his dignity. Here his conduct would be discourteous if there were not a reason for it. He is reserved, unsympathetic, keeps the great man at the staff-end, will not even come out to receive him as common courtesy might have suggested; sends him a curt message of direction, with not a word more than was necessary.

And then, naturally enough, the hot soldier begins to explode. His pride is touched; he has not been received with due deference. If the prophet would have come out and chanted incantations over him, and made mystical motions of his hands above the shining patches of his leprous skin, he could have believed in the cure. But there was nothing in the injunction given for his superstition to lay hold of. His patriotic susceptibilities are roused. If he is to be cleansed by bathing, are not the crystal streams of his own city, the glory of Damascus, better than the turbid and muddy Jordan that belongs to Israel? So he flounced away, and would have sacrificed his hope of cure to his passion if his servants had not brought him to common-sense by their cool remonstrance. He would have done any great thing which he had been set to do; he had already done a great thing in taking the long journey, and being ready to expend all that vast amount of

treasure, and so surely there need be no difficulty in his complying, were it only as an experiment, with the very simple and easy terms which the prophet had enjoined.

Now, all these points may be so put as to suggest for us characteristics of that gospel which is God's cure for our leprosy. And the whole story shows us as in a glass what human nature would like the gospel to be, and how we sick men quarrel with our physic, and stumble at those very characteristics of the gospel which are its main glory and the secret of its power. My only purpose in this sermon is to bring out two or three of these as lying on the surface of the story before us.

I. First, then, God's cure puts us all on one level.

Naaman wished to be treated like a great man that happened to be a leper; Elisha treated him like a leper that happened to be a great man. 'I thought, he will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the Lord his God.' The whole question about his treatment turns on this, Whether is the important thing his disease or his dignity? He thought it was his dignity, the prophet thought it was his disease. And so he served him as he would have served any one else that in similar circumstances, and for a like necessity, had come to him.

And now, if you will generalise that, it just comes to this—that Christianity brushes aside all the surface differences of men, and goes in its treatment of them straight to the central likenesses, the things which, in all mankind, are identical. There are the same wants, the same sorrows, the same necessity for the same cleansing beneath the queen's robes and the peer's ermine, the workman's jacket and the beggar's rags.

Whatever differences of culture, of station, of idiosyncrasy there may be, these are but surface and accidental. We are all alike in this, that we 'have sinned, and come short of the glory of God'; and our Great Physician, in His great remedy, insists upon treating us all as patients, and not as this, that, or the other, kind of patients. The cholera, when it lays hold of ladies and gentlemen, deals with them in precisely the same fashion that it does when it lays hold of waifs on the dunghill; and a wise doctor will treat the Prince of Wales just as he will treat the Prince of Wales's stable-boy. Christianity has nothing to say, in the first place, to the accidents that separate us one from the other, but insists on looking at us all as standing on the one level and partaking of the one characteristic. We may be wise or foolish, we may be learned or ignorant, we may be rich or poor, we may be high or low, we may be barbarian or civilised, but we are all sinners. The leprosy runs through us all, according to the diagnosis of Christianity, and our Elisha deals with Naaman as he deals with the poorest footboy in Naaman's cavalcade who is afflicted with the same disease.

Now that rubs against our self-importance; a great many of us would be quite willing to go to heaven, but we do not like to go in a common caravan. We want to have a compartment to ourselves, and to travel in a manner becoming our position. We are quite willing to be healed, but we would like to be healed with due deference. You are an educated man, a student; you do not like to take the same place as the most unlettered, and to feel that the common fact of sin puts you, in a very solemn respect, upon the level of these narrow foreheads and unlettered people. And so some of you turn away because Christianity, with such im-

partiality and persistency, insists upon the identity of the fact of sin in us all, and passes by the little diversities on which we plume ourselves, and which part us the one from the other. Dear brethren, I am sure that some of my audience have been kept away from the gospel by this humbling characteristic of it, that at the very beginning it insists on bringing us all into the one category; and I venture to ask you to ponder with yourselves this question, Is it not wise, is it not necessary that the physician should look only at the disease and think nothing of all the other facts of the patient's character or life? Surely, surely, it is a fact that we are transgressors, and surely it is a fact that if we be transgressors that is the most important thing about us—far more important than all these diversities of which I have been speaking. They are skin-deep, this is the central truth, that we have souls which ought to stand in a living relation of glad obedience to our Father in heaven; and which, alas! do stand in an attitude often of sulky alienation, often of indifference, and not seldom of rebellion. If so, then it is both wise and kind to deal with that solemn fact first. In wisdom and in mercy Christianity deals with all men as sinners, needing chiefly to be healed of that disease. 'The Scripture hath concluded all under sin'—shut up the whole race as in a great chamber, that so cleansing and forgiveness might reach them all. They are gathered together as patients in a hospital are gathered, that their sickness may be medicined and their wounds dressed.

For this impartiality of the gospel, putting us all on one level, and its determination to deal with us all as sinners, is but the other side of, and the preparation for, that blessed universality of a sacrifice for all, and

a gospel for the whole world. Do not quarrel with your physic because the Physician insists upon dealing with you as sick men.

II. Then take another of the thoughts that come out of the incident before us. God's cure puts the messengers of the cure well away in the background.

Naaman, heathen-like, wanted something sensuous for his confidence in the prophet's cure to lay hold upon. If the prophet would only have come out, and done like the sorcerers and magic-workers of whom he had had experience; if he would have come weaving mystical incantations, and calling upon the God whom he worshipped, but whom Naaman did not, and making passes with his hands over the leprous places—then there would have been something for his sense to build upon, and he would have been ready to believe in the prophet's power to cure. But that was the very thing which the prophet did not want him to believe in. Elisha desired to conceal himself, and to make God's power prominent. He wished to cure Naaman's soul of the leprosy of idolatry as well as to cure his body; and we see, in the sequel of the story, that the very simplicity of the means enjoined and the absence of any human agency, which at first staggered the sensuous nature and offended the pride of Naaman, at last led him to see and confess that there was no God in all the earth but in Israel. Therefore the prophet keeps in the background. His part is not to cure, but to bring God's cure. He is only a voice. He brings the sick man and God's prescription face to face, and there leaves him. Naaman would have liked to force him into the place of a magician, in whom miracle-working power resided. Elisha will only take the place of a herald who proclaims how God's power may be brought

to heal. So men have always sought to turn the messengers of God's cure into miracle-workers. Making the ministers of God's word into priests who by external acts convey grace and forgiveness, is a superstition that has its roots deep in human nature. It is not that the priests have made themselves so much as that the people have made the priests. Here is an instance in a rude form of the tendency which has been at work in all generations, and has been the corruption of Christianity from the beginning, and is doing mischief every day—the tendency to place one's confidence in a man who is supposed to be, in some mysterious manner, the bearer of a grace that will cure and cleanse. And the prophet's position in our story brings out very clearly the position which all Christian ministers hold. They are nothing but heralds, their personality disappears, they are merely a voice. All that they have to do is to bring men into contact with God's own word of command and promise, and then to vanish.

Christianity has no 'priests,' Christianity has no 'sacraments.' Christianity has no external rites which bring grace or help except in so far as by their aid the soul is brought into contact with the truth, and by meditation and faith is thus made capable of receiving more of Christ's Spirit. Our only commission is to bring to you God's message of how you may be healed. When we have said, 'Wash, and be clean,' as plainly, earnestly, and lovingly as we can, we have done all our appointed office. We are heralds, and nothing more. Our business is to preach, not to do rites, or minister sacraments. Our business is to preach, not to argue. We are neither priests nor professors, but preachers. We have to deliver the message given to us faithfully. We have to ring out the proclamation loudly. The

virtue of a town crier is that he make people hear and understand. The virtue of a messenger is that he repeats precisely what he was told. And a Christian minister has to lift up his voice and not be afraid, to see to it that his speech be plain, and that it do not overlay the message with fripperies of ornament, or affectations, or personalities, and to plead earnestly and lovingly with men to come to the divine Healer. John Baptist's description of himself is true of them. With rare self-abnegation, he would only reply to the question, 'Who art thou?' with 'I am a voice.' His personality was nothing. His message was all. A musical string cannot be seen as it vibrates. So the man should be lost in his proclamation. We are heralds and nothing more, and the more we keep in the background and the less our hearers depend on us, the better. If you want priests who will 'call on the name of their God, and wave their hands over the place,' and convey grace and healing to you by anything that they do for or to you, you will have to go beyond the limits of New Testament Christianity to find them. So men quarrel with their medicine because their cure is purely a spiritual process, depending on spiritual forces, and sense cries out for sacred rites and persons to be the channels of God's healing.

III. And now, lastly, God's cure wants nothing from you but to take it.

Naaman's servants were quite right: 'My father! If the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldst thou not have done it?' Yes! Of course he would, and the greater the better. Men will stand, as Indian fakirs do, with their arms above their heads until they stiffen there. They will perch themselves upon pillars, like Simeon Stylites, for years, till the

birds build their nests in their hair : they will measure all the distance from Cape Comorin to Juggernaut's temple with their bodies along the dusty road. They will give the fruit of their body for the sin of their soul. They will wear hair shirts and scourge themselves. They will fast and deny themselves. They will build cathedrals and endow churches. They will do as many of you do, labour by fits and starts all through your lives at the endless task of making yourselves ready for heaven, and winning it by obedience and by righteousness. They will do all these things and do them gladly, rather than listen to the humbling message that says, 'You do not need to do anything—wash!' Is it your washing, or the water, that will clean you? Wash and be clean! Ah, my brother! Naaman's cleansing was only a test of his obedience, and a token that it was God who cleansed him. There was no power in Jordan's waters to take away the taint of leprosy. Our cleansing is in that blood of Jesus Christ that has the power to take away all sin, and to make the foulest amongst us pure and clean.

But the two commandments—that of the symbol in my text, that of the reality in the Christian gospel—are alike in this respect, that both the one and the other are a confession that the man himself has no part in his own cleansing. And so Naamans, in all generations, who were eager to do some great thing, have stumbled, and turned away from that gospel which says, 'It is finished!' 'Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but by His mercy He saved us.' Dear brother, you can do nothing. You do not need to do anything. It is a hard pill for my pride to swallow, to be indebted to absolute mercy, which I have done nothing to bring, for all my hope, but it is a position

that we have to take. Hard to take for all of us, very hard for you who have never looked in the face the solemn fact of your own sinfulness, and pondered upon the consequences of that; but most blessed if only you will open your eyes to see that the stern refusal to accept anything from us as working out our salvation is but the other side of the great truth that Christ's death is all-sufficient, and that in Him the foulest may be clean.

'Nothing in my hand I bring.'

If you bring anything you cannot grasp the Cross. Do not try to eke out Christ's work with yours; do not build upon penitence, or feelings, or faith, or anything, but build only upon this: 'When I had nothing to pay He frankly forgave me all.' And build upon this: 'Christ alone has died for me'; and Christ alone is all-sufficient. 'Wash and be clean'; accept and possess; believe and live!

NAAMAN'S IMPERFECT FAITH

'And he returned to the man of God, he and all his company, and came and stood before him: and he said, Behold, now I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel: now therefore, I pray thee, take a blessing of thy servant. 16. But he said, As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand, I will receive none. And he urged him to take it; but he refused. 17. And Naaman said, Shall there not then, I pray thee, be given to thy servant two mules' burden of earth? for thy servant will henceforth offer neither burnt-offering nor sacrifice unto other gods, but unto the Lord. 18. In this thing the Lord pardon thy servant, that when my master goeth into the house of Rimmon to worship there, and he leaneth on my hand, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon: when I bow down myself in the house of Rimmon, the Lord pardon thy servant in this thing. 19. And he said unto him, Go in peace. So he departed from him a little way. 20. But Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of God, said, Behold, my master hath spared Naaman this Syrian, in not receiving at his hands that which he brought: but, as the Lord liveth, I will run after him, and take somewhat of him. 21. So Gehazi followed after Naaman: and when Naaman saw him running after him, he lighted down from the chariot to meet him, and said, Is all well? 22. And he said, All is well. My master hath sent me, saying, Behold, even now there be come to me from mount Ephraim two young men of the sons of the prophets: give them, I pray thee, a talent of silver, and two changes of garments. 23. And Naaman said, Be content, take two talents. And he urged him, and bound two talents of silver in two bags, with two changes of garments, and laid them upon two of his servants;

and they bare them before him. 24. And when he came to the tower, he took them from their hand, and bestowed them in the house; and he let the men go, and they departed. 25. But he went in, and stood before his master. And Elisha said unto him, Whence comest thou, Gehazi? And he said, Thy servant went no whither. 26. And he said unto him, Went not mine heart with thee, when the man turned again from his chariot to meet thee? Is it a time to receive money, and to receive garments, and oliveyards, and vineyards, and sheep, and oxen, and menservants, and maidservants? 27. The leprosy therefore of Naaman shall cleave unto thee, and unto thy seed for ever. And he went out from his presence a leper as white as snow.'—2 KINGS v. 15-27.

LIKE the Samaritan leper healed by Jesus, Naaman came back to give glory to God. Samaria was quite out of his road to Damascus, but benefit melted his heart, and the pride, which had been indignant that the prophet did not come out to him, faded before thankfulness, which impelled him to go to the prophet. God's gifts should humble, and gratitude is not afraid to stoop. Elisha would not see Naaman before, for he needed to be taught; but he gladly welcomes him into his presence now, for he has learned his lesson. Sometimes the best way to attract is to repel, and the true servant of God consults not his own dignity, but others' good, whichever he does.

I. The first point is the offer and refusal of the gift. The benefited is liberal and the benefactor disinterested. Naaman was a convert to pure monotheism. His avowal is clear and full. But what a miserable conclusion he draws with that 'therefore'! He should have said, 'Therefore I come to trust under the shadow of His wings.' But he is not ready to give himself, and, like some of the rest of us, thinks to compound by giving money. When the outward giving of goods is token of inward surrender of self, it is accepted. When it is a substitute for that, it is rejected. No doubt, too, Naaman thought that Elisha was, like the sorcerers of heathenism, very accessible to gifts; and if he had come to believe in Elisha's God, he had yet to learn the loving-kindness of the God in whom he had come to

believe. He had to learn next that 'the gift of God' was not 'purchased with money,' and the prophet's acceptance of his present would have dimmed Elisha's own character, and that of his God, in the newly opened eyes of Naaman.

Elisha's answer begins with the solemn adjuration which we first hear from Elijah. In its use here, it not only declares the unalterable determination of Elisha, but reveals its grounds. To a man who feels ever the burning consciousness that he is in the presence of God, all earthly good dwindles into nothing. How should talents of silver and gold, and changes of raiment, have worth in eyes before which that awful, blessed vision flames? A candle shows black against the sun. If we walk all the day in the light of God's countenance, we shall not see much brightness to dazzle us in the pale and borrowed lights of earth. The vivid realisation of God in our daily lives is the true shield against the enticements of the world. Further, the consciousness of being God's servant, which is implied in the expression 'before whom I stand,' makes a man shrink from receiving wages from men. 'To his own Master he standeth or falleth,' and will be scrupulously careful that no taint of apparent self-seeking shall spoil his service, in the eyes of men or in the judgment of the 'great Taskmaster.' Elisha felt that the honour of his order, and, in some sense, of his God, in the eyes of this half-convert, depended on his own perfect and transparent disinterestedness. Therefore, although he made no scruple of taking the Shunemite's gifts, and probably lived on similar offerings, he steadfastly refused the enormous sum proffered by Naaman. 'The labourer is worthy of his hire,' but if accepting it is likely to make people think that he did

his work for the sake of it, he must refuse it. A hireling is not a man who is paid for his work, but one who works for the sake of the pay. If once a professed servant of God falls under reasonable suspicion of doing that, his power for good is ended, as it should be.

II. The next point to notice is the alloy in the gold, or the imperfection of Naaman's new convictions. He had been cured of his leprosy at once, but the cure of his soul had to be more gradual. It is unreasonable to expect clear sight, with the power of rightly estimating magnitudes, from a man seeing for the first time. But though Naaman's shortcomings are very natural and excusable, they are plainly shortcomings. Note the two forms which they take,—superstition and selfish compromise. What good would a couple of loads of soil be, and could he not have taken that from the roadside without leave? The connection between the two halves of verse 17 makes his object plain. He wished the earth 'for' he would not sacrifice but to Jehovah. That is, he meant to use it as the foundation of an altar, as if only some of the very ground on which Jehovah had manifested Himself was sacred enough for such a purpose. He did not, indeed, think of 'the Lord' as a local deity of Israel, as his ample confession of faith in verse 15 proves; but neither had he reached the point of feeling that the Being worshipped makes the altar sacred. No wonder that he did not unlearn in an hour his whole way of thinking of religion! The reliance on externals is too natural to us all, even with all our training in a better faith, to allow of our wondering at or severely blaming him. A sackful of earth from Palestine has been supposed to make a whole graveyard a 'Campo Santo'; and, no

doubt, there are many good people in England who have carried home bottles of Jordan water for christenings. Does not the very name of 'the Holy Land' witness to the survival of Naaman's sentimental error?

The other tarnish on the clear mirror was of a graver kind. Notice that he does not ask Elisha's sanction to his intended compromise, but simply announces his intention, and hopes for forgiveness. It looks ill when a man, in the first fervour of adopting a new faith, is casting about for ways to reconcile it with the public profession of his old abandoned one. We should have thought better of Naaman's monotheism, if he had not coupled his avowal of it, where it was safe to be honest, with the announcement that he did not intend to stand by his avowal when it was risky. It would have required huge courage to have gone back to Damascus and denied Rimmon; and our censure must be lenient, but decided.

Naaman was the first preacher of a doctrine of compromise, which has found eminent defenders and practisers, in our own and other times. To separate the official from the man, and to allow the one to profess in public a creed which the other disavows in private, is rank immorality, whoever does or advocates it. The motive in this case was, perhaps, not so much cowardice as selfish unwillingness to forfeit position and favour at court. He wants to keep all the good things he has got; and he tries to blind his conscience by representing the small compliance of bowing as almost forced on him by the grasp of the bowing king, who leaned on his hand. But was it necessary that he should be the king's favourite? A deeper faith would have said, 'Perish court favour and everything that hinders me from making known whose I am.' But

Naaman is an early example of the family of 'Facing-both-ways,' and of trying to 'make the best of both worlds.' But his sophistication of conscience will not do, and his own dissatisfaction with his excuse peeps out plainly in his petition that he may be forgiven. If his act needed forgiveness, it should not have been done, nor thus calmly announced. It is vain to ask forgiveness beforehand for known sin about to be committed.

Elisha is not asked for his sanction, and he neither gives nor refuses it. He dismissed Naaman with cold dignity, in the ordinary conventional form of leave-taking. His silence indicated at least the absence of hearty approval, and probably he was silent to Naaman because, as he said about the Shunemite's trouble, the Lord had been silent to him, and he had no authoritative decision to give. Let us hope that Naaman's faith grew and stiffened before the time of trial came, and that he did not lie to God in the house of Rimmon. Let us take the warning that we are to publish on the housetops what we hear in the ear, and that, if in anything we should be punctiliously sincere, it is in the profession of our faith.

III. The last point is Gehazi's avarice, and what he got by it. How differently the same sight affected the man who lived near God and the one who lived by sense! Elisha had no desires stirred by the wealth in Naaman's train. Gehazi's mouth watered after it. Regulate desires and you rule conduct. The true regulation of desires is found in communion with God. Gehazi had a sordid soul, like Judas; and, like the traitor Apostle, he was untouched by contact with goodness and unworldliness. Perhaps the parallel might be carried farther, and both were moved with

coarse contempt for their master's silly indifference to earthly good. That feeling speaks in Gehazi's soliloquy. He evidently thought the prophet a fool for having let 'this Syrian' off so easily. He was fair game, and he had brought the wealth on purpose to leave it. Profanity speaks in uttering a solemn oath on such an occasion. The putting side by side of 'the Lord liveth' and 'I will run after him' would be ludicrous if it were not horrible. How much profanity may live close beside a prophet, and learn nothing from him but a holy name to sully in an oath!

The after part of the story suggests that Naaman was out of sight of the city before he saw Gehazi coming after him. The cunning liar timed his arrival well. The courtesy of Naaman in lighting down from his chariot to receive the prophet's servant shows how real a change had been wrought upon him, even though there were imperfections in him. Gehazi's story is well hung together, and has plenty of 'local colour' to make it probable. Such glib ingenuity in lying augurs long practice in the art. If he had been content with a small fee, he needed only to have told the truth; but his story was required to put a fair face on the amount of his request. And in what an amiable light it sets Elisha! He would not take for himself, but he has nothing to give to the two imaginary scholars, who have come from some of the schools of the prophets in the hill-country of Ephraim, thirsting for instruction. How sweet the picture, and what a hard heart that could refuse the request! Truly said Paul, 'The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.' Any sin may come from it, and be done to gratify it. 'Honestly if you can, but get it,' was Gehazi's principle, as it is that of many a man in the Christian Churches of this day.

Greed of gain is a sin that seldom keeps house alone. Naaman no doubt was glad to give, both because he was grateful, and because, like most people in high positions, he was galled by the sense of obligation to a man beneath him in rank. So back went Gehazi, with the two Syrian slaves carrying his baggage for him, and he chuckling at his lucky stroke, and pleasantly imagining how to spend his wealth.

'The tower' in verse 24 is more correctly 'the hill,' and it was probably there where the little group would come in sight of Elisha's house. So Gehazi gets rid of the porters before they could be seen or speak to any one, and manages his load for a little way himself, carefully hides it in the house, and, seeing the men safely off, appears obsequious and innocent before Elisha. The prophet's gift of supernatural knowledge was intermittent, as witness his ignorance of the Shunemite's sorrow; but Gehazi must have known its occasional action, and we can fancy that his heart sank at the ominous question, so curt in the original, and conveying so clearly the prophet's knowledge that he had been away from the house: 'Whence, Gehazi?' One lie needs another to cover it, and every sin is likely to beget a successor. So, with some tremor, but without hesitation, he tries to hide his tracks. Did not Elisha's eye pierce the wretched hypocrite as with a dart? and did not his voice ring like a judgment trumpet, as he confounded the silent sinner with the conviction that the prophet himself had been at the spot, though his body had remained in the house? So, at last, will men be reduced to stony dumbness, when they discover that an Eye which can see deeper than Elisha's has been gazing on all their secret sins. The question, 'Is this a time to receive?' etc., suggests the

special reasons, in Naaman's new faith, for conspicuous disregard of wealth, in order that he might thereby learn the free love of Elisha's God and of Jehovah's servant, both of which had been tarnished by Gehazi's ill-omened greed. The long enumeration following on 'garments' includes, no doubt, the things that Gehazi had solaced his return with the thought of buying, and so adds another proof that his heart was turned inside out before the prophet.

His punishment is severe; but his sin was great. The leprosy was a fitting punishment, both because it had been Naaman's, from which obedient reliance on God had set him free, and because of its symbolical meaning, as the type of sin. Gehazi got his coveted money, but he got something else along with it, which he did not bargain for, and which took all the sweetness out of it. That is always the case. 'Ill-gotten gear never prospers'; and, if a man has set his heart on worldly good, he may succeed in amassing a fortune, but the leprosy will cleave to him, and his soul will be all crusted and foul with that living death. How many successful men, perhaps high in reputation in the Church as in the world, would stand 'lepers as white as snow,' if we had God's eyes to see them with!

SIGHT AND BLINDNESS

'Then the king of Syria warred against Israel, and took counsel with his servants, saying, In such and such a place shall be my camp. 9. And the man of God sent unto the king of Israel, saying, Beware that thou pass not such a place; for thither the Syrians are come down. 10. And the king of Israel sent to the place which the man of God told him and warned him of, and saved himself there, not once nor twice. 11. Therefore the heart of the king of Syria was sore troubled for this thing; and he called his servants, and said unto them, Will ye not shew me which of us is for the king of Israel? 12. And one of his servants said, None, my Lord, O king: but Elisha, the prophet that is in Israel, telleth the king of Israel the words that thou speakest in thy bedchamber. 13. And he said, Go and spy where he

is, that I may send and fetch him. And it was told him, saying, Behold, he is in Dothan. 14. Therefore sent he thither horses, and chariots, and a great host: and they came by night, and compassed the city about. 15. And when the servant of the man of God was risen early, and gone forth, behold, an host compassed the city both with horses and chariots. And his servant said unto him, Alas, my master! how shall we do? 16. And he answered, Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them. 17. And Elisha prayed, and said, Lord, I pray Thee, open his eyes, that he may see. And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha. 18. And when they came down to him, Elisha prayed unto the Lord, and said, Smite this people, I pray Thee, with blindness. And He smote them with blindness according to the word of Elisha.'—2 KINGS VI. 8-18.

THE revelation of the angel guard around Elisha is the important part of this incident, but the preliminaries to it may yield some instruction. The first point to be noted is the friendly relations between the king and the prophet. The king was probably Joram, who had given up Baal worship, though still retaining the calves at Bethel and Dan (2 Kings iii. 2). The whole tone of things is changed from the stormy days of Elijah. The prophet is frequently an inhabitant of the capital, and a trusted counsellor. No doubt much of this improvement was owing to Elijah's undaunted denunciation, but much, too, was due to Elisha's gentle persuasion. We are often tempted to do injustice to the sterner predecessors when we see how the gentler ways of their followers seem to accomplish more than theirs did. Unless winter storms had come first, spring sunshine would draw forth few flowers. All honour to the heroes who begin the fight, and do not see the victory.

The Syrian king's way of warfare was not by a regular continued invasion, but by dashes across the border on undefended places; and time after time he found himself out in his calculations, and troops enough to beat him off massed where he meant to strike. No wonder that he suspected treachery. The prompt answer of his servants implies that Elisha's intervention was well known by them, and measures the reputation in which

he stood. Let no one suppose that thwarting Syria was an unworthy use of a supernatural gift. The preservation of Israel and the revelation of God were worthy ends, and all that is accessory to a worthy end is worthy. It is foolish to call anything a trifle which serves a great purpose.

Joram had learned to obey the prophet, and his people and their enemies had learned that Elisha was a prophet. That was much. He had no great revelations of the deep things of God to give to his generation or to posterity, but he gave directions as to practical life which bore on the wellbeing of the state; and that office was not less divinely conferred. It is a good thing when God's servants are not afraid to make their voices heard in politics, and a safeguard for a nation when their counsels are taken. The quiet prophet was more to Israel than an army.

The 'great host' sent to capture Elisha shows the terror which he had inspired, and the importance attached to getting possession of him. It is, too, an odd instance of the inconsistency of godless men, in that it never occurs to the Syrian king that Elisha, who knew all his schemes, might know this one too, or that horses and chariots were of little use against a man who had Heaven to back him. Dothan lay on an isolated hill in a wide plain, and could easily be surrounded. A night-march offered the chance of a surprise, which seems to have been prevented by the unusually early rising of Elisha's servant, the young successor of Gehazi. Apparently he had gone out of the little city before he discovered the besiegers, and then rushed back in terror. Note the strongly contrasted pictures of the lad and his master,—the one representing the despair of sense, the other the confidence of faith. The lad's passionate exclamation

was most natural, and fear darkening to bewildered helplessness is reasonable to men who only see the material and visible dangers and enemies that beset every life.] The wonder is, not that we should sometimes be afraid, but that we should ever be free from fear, if we look only at visible facts. Worse foes ring us round than those whose armour glittered in the morning sunshine at Dothan, and we are as helpless to cope with them as that frightened youth was. Any man who calmly reflects on the possibilities and certainties of his life will find abundant reason for a sinking heart. So much that is dreadful and sad may come, and so much must come, that the boldest may well shrink, and the most resourceful cry 'Alas! how shall we do?' It is not courage, but blindness, which enables godless men to front life so unconcernedly.

How nobly the calmness of Elisha shows beside the lad's alarm! Probably both were now outside the city, as the immediately following verse speaks of the mountain as the scene. If so, Elisha had gone forth to meet the enemy, and that must have brought fresh terror to his servant. The quiet 'Fear not!' was of little use without the assurance of the next clause; for there is no more idle expenditure of breath than in telling a man not to be afraid, and doing nothing to remove the grounds of his fear. That is all that the world can do to comfort or hearten. 'Fear not?' the youth might well have said. 'It is all very easy to say that; but look there! How can I help being afraid?' There is only one way to help it, and that is to believe that 'they that be with us are more than they that be with them.' The true and only conqueror of reasonable fear is still more reasonable trust. The two parts played by the servant and the prophet are united in the man who

cleaves to Jesus Christ as his defence. He would not cling so close to Him but for the fear that tightens his grip. He would tremble far more but for that grip. He who says in his heart, 'What time I am afraid, I will trust in Thee,' will presently get to saying, 'I will trust, and not be afraid.'

Note, further, the sight seen by opened eyes. Elisha did not pray that the heavenly guards might come; for they were there already. Nor does it appear that he saw them; for he did not need that heightened condition of spiritual perception which appears to be meant by the opening of the eyes. And what a sight the trembling young man saw! Where he had seen only barren rock or sparse vegetation, he saw that same fiery host that had attended Elijah in his translation, now enclosing the unarmed prophet and himself within a flaming ring. [The manifestation, not the presence, of the angel guards was the miracle. It was a momentary unveiling of what always was, and would be after the curtain was drawn again. I suppose that no reverent reader of Scripture can doubt the existence of angelic beings, or their office to 'minister to the heirs of salvation.'] To us, indeed, who know Him who is the 'Head of all principalities and powers,' the doctrine of angelic ministration is of less importance than that of Christ's divine help; but the latter truth does not supersede the former, though its brightness throws the other, about which we know so much less, into comparative shadow. But we may still learn from this transient disclosure of 'the things that are,' the permanent truth of the ever-active presence of divinely sent helps and guards, with all who trust in Him.

This manifestation has several features of resemblance to that given to Jacob, in his most defenceless

hour, when he saw beside his unprotected camp of women and children 'God's host,' and, in a rapture of thankful wonder, named the place 'Mahanaim,'—'Two Camps.' [The sight teaches us that God's messengers are ever near, and then most near when needed most. It tells us, too, that they come in the form needed. They are warriors when we are ringed about by foes, counsellors when we are perplexed, comforters when we mourn. Their shapes are as varied as our needs, and ever correspond to 'the present distress.' They come in power sufficient to conquer. There was force enough circling the prophet to have annihilated all the Syrians. True, they did not draw their celestial swords, but they were there, and their presence was enough for the triumphant faith of the guarded men. What living thing could come through that wall of fire?]

Our eyes are blinded and we need to have them cleared, if not in the same manner as this lad's, yet in an analogous way. We look so constantly at the things seen that we have no sight for the unseen. Worldliness, sin, unbelief, sense and its trifles, time and its transitoriness, blind the eyes of our mind; and we need those of sense to be closed, that these may open. The truest vision is the vision of faith. It is certain, direct, and conclusive. The world says, 'Seeing is believing'; the gospel says, 'Believing is seeing.' If we would but live near to Jesus Christ, pray to Him to touch our blind eyeballs, and turn away from the dazzling unrealities which sense brings, we should find Him 'the master-light of all our seeing,' and be sure of the eternal, invisible things, with an assurance superior to that given by the keenest sight in the brightest sunshine. When we are blind to earth, we see earth glorified by

angel presences, and fear and despair and helplessness and sorrow flee away from our tranquil hearts. If, on the other hand, we fix our gaze on earth and its trifles, there will generally be more to alarm than to encourage, and we shall do well to be afraid, if we do not see, as in such a case we shall certainly not see, the fiery wall around us, behind which God keeps His people safe.

Note, finally, the blindness. Elisha's dealing with the advancing host of Syria can only be rightly estimated by looking beyond the limits of the text. His object was to carry the whole army into Samaria, that they might there be won by giving them bread to eat and water to drink, and so heaping coals of fire on their head. The prophet, who was in so many points a foreshadowing of the gospel type of excellence, was the first to show the right way to conquer. Nineteen centuries of so-called Christianity have not brought 'Christendom' to practise Elisha's recipe for finishing a war. It succeeded in his hands; for, after that feast and liberation of a captured army, 'the bands of Syria came no more into the land of Israel.' How could they, as long as the remembrance of that kindness lasted? Pity that the same sort of treatment were not tried to-day!

The blindness which fell on the Syrians does not seem to have been total loss of sight,—for, if so, they could not have followed Elisha to Samaria, nearly fifteen miles off,—but rather an ocular affection which prevented them from recognising what they saw. It was a supernatural impediment in any case, however far it extended. God did 'according to the word of Elisha,' a wonderful inversion of the ordinary formula. But that was because Elisha was doing according to the word of the Lord. The prayers which are 'according to His will' are the answered prayers.

They who see not the angels, see nothing clearly. There is a mist over every eye that beholds only the things of time, which prevents it from seeing these as they are, and from recognising a prophet when he is before them. If we would rightly estimate the objects of sense, we must discern, shining through them, the far loftier and greater things of eternity. That flaming background is needed to supply a scale by which to measure the others. The flat plain of Lombardy is most beautiful when its flatness is seen girdled by the giant Alps, where lies the purity of the snow which feeds the rivers that fertilise the levels below.

'IMPOSSIBLE,—ONLY I SAW IT'

'Then Elisha said, Hear ye the word of the Lord; Thus saith the Lord, To-morrow about this time shall a measure of fine flour be sold for a shekel, and two measures of barley for a shekel, in the gate of Samaria. 2. Then a lord on whose hand the king leaned answered the man of God, and said, Behold, if the Lord would make windows in heaven, might this thing be? And he said, Behold, thou shalt see it with thine eyes, but shalt not eat thereof. 3. And there were four leprous men at the entering in of the gate: and they said one to another, Why sit we here until we die? 4. If we say, We will enter into the city, then the famine is in the city, and we shall die there: and if we sit still here, we die also. Now therefore come, and let us fall unto the host of the Syrians: if they save us alive, we shall live; and if they kill us, we shall but die. 5. And they rose up in the twilight, to go unto the camp of the Syrians: and when they were come to the uttermost part of the camp of Syria, behold, there was no man there. 6. For the Lord had made the host of the Syrians to hear a noise of chariots, and a noise of horses, even the noise of a great host: and they said one to another, Lo, the king of Israel hath hired against us the kings of the Hittites, and the kings of the Egyptians, to come upon us. 7. Wherefore they arose and fled in the twilight, and left their tents, and their horses, and their asses, even the camp as it was, and fled for their life. 8. And when these lepers came to the uttermost part of the camp, they went into one tent, and did eat and drink, and carried thence silver, and gold, and raiment, and went and hid it; and came again, and entered into another tent, and carried thence also, and went and hid it. 9. Then they said one to another, We do not well: this day is a day of good tidings, and we hold our peace: if we tarry till the morning light, some mischief will come upon us: now therefore come, that we may go and tell the king's household. 10. So they came and called unto the porter of the city: and they told them, saying, We came to the camp of the Syrians, and, behold, there was no man there, neither voice of man, but horses tied, and asses tied, and the tents as they were. 11. And he called the porters; and they told it to the king's house within. 12. And the king arose in the night, and said unto his servants, I will now shew you what the Syrians have done to us. They know that we be hungry; therefore are they gone out of the camp to hide themselves in the field, saying, When they come out of the city

we shall catch them alive, and get into the city. 13. And one of his servants answered and said, Let some take, I pray thee, five of the horses that remain, which are left in the city, (behold, they are as all the multitude of Israel that are left in it: behold, I say, they are even as all the multitude of the Israelites that are consumed:) and let us send and see. 14. They took therefore two chariot horses; and the king sent after the host of the Syrians, saying, Go and see. 15. And they went after them unto Jordan: and, lo, all the way was full of garments and vessels, which the Syrians had cast away in their haste. And the messengers returned, and told the king. 16. And the people went out, and spoiled the tents of the Syrians. So a measure of fine flour was sold for a shekel, and two measures of barley for a shekel, according to the word of the Lord.—2 KINGS VII. 1-16.

THE keynote of this incident lies in the promise in the first verse. The whole story illustrates man's too frequent rejection of God's promise, and God's wonderful way of fulfilling it.

I. We note first the promise which common-sense finds incredible. It came from Elisha when all seemed desperate. The wonderfully vivid narrative in the previous chapter tells a pitiful tale of women boiling their children, of unclean food worth more than its weight in silver, of a king worked up to a pitch of frenzy and murderous designs, and renouncing his allegiance to Jehovah. Such faith as he had was strained to the breaking point, and his messenger was sent to tell the prophet that the king would not 'wait for the Lord any longer.' That was the moment chosen to speak the promise. It came, as God's helps, both of promise and act, so often come, at the very nick of time, when faith is ready to fail and human aid is vain. Before we had learned our hopeless state, they would come too soon for our good; after faith had wholly parted from its moorings, they would come too late.

Note the precision and confidence of the promise. The hour of the fulfilment, and the price of flour and the cheaper barley are stated. Man's promises are vague; God's are specific. Mark, too, the entire silence of the promise as to the mode of its fulfilment. Probably Elisha knew as little as any one, how it was going

to be accomplished. The particularity and vagueness combined are remarkable. A hint as to how the thing was to be done would have made the belief in the fact so much easier. Yes, and just because it would have smoothed the road for worthless belief, it was not given, but the apparently impossible promise was left in nakedness, for any one who needed sense to animate his faith, to scoff at. Is not that emphatic assertion of the fact, and emphatic silence as to the 'how,' a frequent characteristic of God's promises? If ever we are kept in the dark as to the latter, it is for our good, and for the encouragement of our growth in utter dependence and perfect trust. It is not well for the trusting soul to ask too curiously about methods intervening between the promise in the present and its accomplishment in the future. It is better for peace and the simplicity of our trust, that we should be content to cling to the faithful word, and to 'believe . . . that it shall be even as it was told' us, without troubling ourselves about His way of effecting His purposes. Passengers are not admitted to the engine-room, nor allowed on the bridge. Let them leave all the working of the ship to the captain.

II. The noble who blurted out his incredulity had a great deal to say for himself from the common-sense and worldly point of view. But he need not have sneered, in the same breath, at old miracles and new. His sarcasm about 'windows in heaven' refers to the story of the flood; and perhaps there is a hint of allusion to the manna. He neither believed these ancient deeds, nor the promise for to-morrow. Why not? Simply because he—wise as he thought himself—could not see any way of bringing it about. There are many of us yet who have the same modest opinion of

our own acuteness, and go on the supposition that what we do not see is invisible, and what we cannot do, or imagine done, is impossible. Why should not the Lord 'make windows in heaven' if He please? Or, how does the pert objector know that that is the only way of fulfilling the promise? He will be taught that he has not quite exhausted all the possibilities open to Omnipotence, and that something much simpler than windows in heaven can do what is wanted. Unbelief which rejects God's plain promises because it does not see how they can be fulfilled is common enough still, and is as unreasonable as it is impertinent. Elisha was as ignorant as this nobleman was, of the means, but his faith fixed its eyes on the faithful word, and trusted, while sense, self-conceit, and worldliness, a mole pretending to have an eagle's eye, declared that to be impossible which it could not see the way to bring about, and thereby exposed only its own blind arrogance.

III. Elisha's answer (v. 2) sounds liker Elijah. The utmost gentleness is stirred to pronounce condemnation on self-confident unbelief, and a gentler gentleness than Elisha's, even Christ's, shrinks not from executing the sentence. Is not the sentence on this scoffing lord the very sentence pronounced ever on unbelief? In his case, it was fulfilled by the crowd that pressed, in their ravenous hunger, through the gate, and trod him down; but in ordinary cases, in our days, the natural operation of unbelief is to shut men out from the fruition, of which faith is the necessary and only condition. It is no avenging and arbitrarily imposed exclusion, but the necessary result of self-made disqualification, which brings on the unbeliever the doom, 'Thou shalt not eat thereof.' The blessings of the religious life on earth, and the glories of its perfection in

heaven, are only enjoyable through faith. These are not so plainly visible to the unbelieving heart as the scene at the gate was to the nobleman; but, in some measure, even those who do not possess them do, in some lucid moments, see their worth. It is one sad part of the sad lives of godless men that they have their seasons of calm weather, when, in the clearer atmosphere, they catch glimpses of their true good, but that they yet do not behold it long and close enough to be smitten with the desire to possess it, and so the sight remains inoperative, or adds to their condemnation. Not to taste is the sadder fate, because there has been sight. To have eyes opened at last to our own folly, and to see the rich provision of God's table, when it is too late, will be a chief pang of future retribution,—as it sometimes is of present godlessness.

IV. Passing over for the present the account of the discovery by the four lepers, we may next note God's way of fulfilling His promise. A panic would spread fast in an undisciplined army, and history supplies examples of the swift change into a mob under the influence of groundless terror. There is nothing wonderful in the helter-skelter rush for the Jordan, or in the road being littered with abandoned baggage. The divine intervention produced the impression which naturally brought the flight about, and the coincidence of the prophecy and the panic which fulfilled it stamp both as divinely originated. But if we looked on events as devoutly, and saw into their true character as deeply as the author of the Books of Kings does, we should see that many a similar coincidence, which we trace no farther than to men or circumstances, was due to the same divine cause which made the Syrians to hear

'the noise of a great host.' Track the river of life to its source, and you come to God.

'The wicked fleeth when no man pursueth.' Imaginary terrors are apt to beset those who have no trust in God. If we fear Him, we need have no other fear; but if we have not Him for our anchorage, we shall be driven by gusts of passion and terror. The unseen possibilities of attack and defeat may well terrify a man who has not the unseen God to keep him calm.

Windows in heaven, then, were not needed, and the arrogance which said **'Impossible!'** had not measured all the resources of God. A very wise scientist here in England proved that the Atlantic could not be crossed by a steamer, and the first steamer that did cross took out copies of his book. How foolish men's demonstrations of impossibility look beside God's deliverances! We have not gone through all the chambers of His storehouse, and **'His ways are far above, out of our sight.'** Let us hold fast by the faith that His arm is strong to do whatever His lips are gracious to engage, nor let our inability to see where the river gets through the mountains ever make us doubt that it will reach the sunlit ocean.

V. We may throw together the remaining parts of the incident, as showing how the fulfilled promise was received. These four lepers had heard nothing of it, when despair made them venturesome. How reckless they were, and how they harp on the one gloomy word **'die!'** The thought was familiar to them, and yet, lepers though they were, life was sweet, and a chance of prolonging it, even as slaves, was worth trying. They chose twilight, that they might be unobserved. We can see them creeping cautiously, with beating hearts, towards the camp, expecting every

moment to be challenged, and possibly slain. How their caution would diminish and their wonder grow, as they passed from end to end, and found no one! There stood the horses and asses, left behind lest their footfalls should betray the flight, and every tent empty of men and full of spoil. The lepers seem to have gone right through the camp before they ventured to begin plundering; for the 'uttermost part' in verse 5 and that in verse 8 are naturally understood of its opposite extremities. Then, secure against surprise, they eat and drink as ravenously as men who had been starving so long would do. Twilight had deepened into darkness before hunger and greed were satisfied. Not till then did they awake to their duty; and even when they bethink themselves, it is fear of punishment, not care for a city full of hungry men, that moves them. But their tardy awaking to duty is couched in words which carry a great truth, especially to all who have tasted the Bread of Life. It is 'not well' to 'hold our peace' in 'a day of good tidings.' If we have good news, especially *the* good news, its possession obliges us to impart it. If we have tasted the graciousness of the Lord, we are bound to tell of the stores we have found. 'He that withholdeth corn, the people shall curse him.' 'Of how much sorer punishment . . . shall he be thought worthy,' who keeps to himself the food of the world?

Lepers were strange messengers of good, but the message graces the bringer, and they who tell good tidings are sure of a welcome. God does not choose great men for the heralds of His mercy, but the qualification is personal experience. These four could only say, 'We have seen and tasted,' but that was enough. The king's caution was very natural, and would have

been quite blameless, if God's promise had not been spoken the day before. But that made the slowness to believe a sin. Feeling one's way over untried ice is prudent; but if we have previously been told that it will bear, it proves our distrust of him who told us. The despatch of the chariots to make a reconnaissance was needless trouble. But men are always apt to think that faith is but a shaky ground of certitude unless it be backed up by sense. When God gives us His word to trust to, we are wisest if we trust to it alone, and we may save ourselves the trouble of sending out scouts to see if it is really beginning to be fulfilled. Elisha had no need to wait the report of the charioteers before he believed in the fulfilment of the promise, which others had found incredible when spoken, and too good to be true even when fulfilled. Let us trust God, whether sense can attest the incipient accomplishment of His words or no.

SILENT CHRISTIANS

'Then they said one to another, We do not well; this day is a day of good tidings, and we hold our peace; if we tarry till the morning light, some mischief will come upon us; now therefore come, that we may go and tell the king's household.'—
2 KINGS vii. 2.

THE city of Samaria was closely besieged, and suffering all the horrors of famine. Women were boiling and eating their children, and the most revolting garbage was worth its weight in silver. Four starving lepers, sitting by the gate, plucked up courage from the extremity of their distress, and looking in each other's bloodshot eyes, whispered one to another, with their hoarse voices: 'If we say we will enter into the city, then the famine is in the city, and we shall die there; and if we sit still here we die also. Now therefore come.

and let us fall unto the host of the Syrians; if they save us alive we shall live; and if they kill us we shall but die.' So in the twilight they stole away. As they come near the camp there is a strange silence; no guards, no stir. They creep to the first tent and find it empty; and then another, and another, and another, till at last it admits of no doubt that certainly the enemy has gone, leaving all his baggage behind him. So for awhile they feast and plunder—small blame to them! And then conscience wakes, and the same thought occurs to each of them: 'This is not patriotic; this is scarcely human; it is a shame for us to be sitting here gorging ourselves whilst a city is starving within a stone's-throw.' So they say one to another in the words of my text.

Now these men's consciousness of the obligation imposed upon them by the knowledge of glad news, their self-reproach for their silence, their conviction that retribution would fall on them if it continued, and their resolve therefore to clear themselves, may all be transferred to higher regions, and may fairly illustrate Christian responsibilities and duties.

I wish to say one or two very homely, plain things about Christian men's obligation to speech, and the sin of their silence. My remarks will have no special reference to any particular forms of Christian activity, but if I succeed in impressing on any a deeper sense of duty in reference to declaring the Gospel than they possess, then all forms of it will be prosecuted with greater vigour and consecration.

I. I wish first to dwell for a moment on that—I was going to use a plain word and say—*hideous*; I will substitute a milder term, and say—*remarkable*, fact of Christian silence.

I take this congregation as a fair average representative of the ordinary habitudes of professing Christians of this generation. How many men and women there are sitting in these pews, who, if I asked them the question, would say that they were Christians? and what proportion of these, if I asked them the further question, 'Did you ever tell anybody anything about Jesus Christ?' would say. No, never! I know this, that in regard to all the recognised and associated forms of Christian work which cluster round a Christian congregation, it is the same handful of people that do them all. It is just like the bits of glass in a kaleidoscope, there are not many of them though you can shake them up into a great number of patterns, but they are always the very same bits. So I could go through pew after pew, if it would not be very personal, and find men and women, one after another—rows of them—that, so far as any of the united work of a church goes, are absolutely idle. They are worthy kind of people, too, with some real religion in them; but yet, partly from shyness, partly from indolence, partly because (as they think) they have so much else to do, and for a number of other reasons that I do not need to dwell upon, they fall into the great army of idlers, and are just so much dead weight and surplusage, as far as the work of the Church is concerned.

Now I do not mean to say that, because professing Christian people do not work in any recognised forms of Christian service which are attached to a congregation, therefore they are not doing anything. God forbid! There are many of you, for instance, mothers of families, whose best service is to speak about Jesus Christ to your children, and to live according as you

speak, and that is work enough for you. There are many more of us, who, for various legitimate reasons, are precluded from taking part in organised forms of Christian service. Do not so fatally misunderstand me as to suppose that I am merely beating a drum to get recruits for societies. What I want to impress upon every Christian person listening to me now is simply this, the anomaly of the fact, if it be a fact, that you are a *dumb* Christian. You can all speak, if you will; you all have people with whom your speech is weighty and powerful. There are doors open before each of you. Ask yourselves, have you gone in at the open doors? or is it true about you that you have never felt the obligation to make your Master known to others, or, at all events, have never felt it so strongly that it compelled you to obey? The strange fact of Christian silence is one that I emphasise to begin with.

II. Let me say a word next about the sin of this silence.

These four poor lepers had not had much kindness dealt out to them in their lives, and they might have been pardoned if in their moment of joy they had remained in the isolation to which they had been condemned by reason of their disease. But they think to themselves of the hollow eyes in Samaria there, and the hideous meals, that might stay hunger but brought no nourishment, and of the king with sackcloth beneath his royal robes, and, forgetting everything but their abundance and these people's empty stomachs, they say, '*Not thus* must we do,' as the Hebrew might be translated, '*this is a day of good tidings, and we hold our peace; and that is a sin. And if we continue dumb, then before morning some kind of punishment will come down upon us.*'

Now, let me put what I have to say on this matter into two sentences.

First of all, I say that such silence is inhuman. You would all recognise that in the case of an actual, literal, instead of a metaphorical, famine. What would you say about a man who contented himself with sitting in his own back room, where nobody could see his abundance, and feasting to the full, whilst his fellow-citizens were dying of starvation? Why! you would say he was a brute. And if Christian people believed as thoroughly that men and women without 'the Bread of God which comes down from Heaven' were starving and dying of hunger, as they believe that men without literal bread must die, there would not be so many dumb ones amongst them; and they would feel more distinctly than any of us feel now, the responsibility that is laid upon them, and the inhumanity of the sin.

Dear brethren! God has made this strange brotherhood of humanity in which we live, all intertwined and intertangled together, mainly in order that there may be scope for brotherly impartation to the needy, of the gifts that each possesses. And He has given to each of us something or other which, by the very terms of the gift and the purpose of the bestowment, we are bound to impart to others. The meaning of our being born into the brotherhood of humanity is that God's grace, in some shape or other, may fructify through us to all; and I say that the man who possesses any kind of gift, and, especially, God's highest gifts of wisdom and of knowledge, and most of all, the highest gift of spiritual knowledge and moral and religious truth, and keeps them to himself, in his idleness is sinfully active, and in his selfishness is inhuman and cruel. The very constitution of humanity says to us that 'we

do not well,' if in the 'day of good tidings' of any sort 'we hold our peace.' The possession of mere physical or abstract truth does not turn its possessors into its apostles, but the possession of moral and spiritual truth does. We are, every one of us, responsible for all the eyes which we could have opened and which are still dark, and for every soul that gropes in ignorance, if we possess something that would enlighten its darkness.

But then, further, let me say that this sin of silence is in sheer contradiction of every principle of Christianity. Why has God given you His grace, do you suppose? For what purpose comes it that you are Christians? Were you converted that you might go by yourselves into a solitary heaven, do you think? Are you important enough to be an ultimate end of God's mercy? Or are you indeed an end, but only that in your turn you might be a means of transmitting? Does the electric influence terminate when it reaches you, or is it turned on to you that from you it may be passed to others? The very purpose of the existence of a Christian Church is counterworked and thwarted by dumb Christians. We Nonconformists can talk abundantly when ecclesiastical assumptions have to be fought against, about the priesthood of all believers. Very well, if that principle is a true one—and it is a true one—it has other applications than simply controversial, and is meant for other uses than simply that you should brandish it in the face of sacerdotal claims and priest-ridden churches. 'Ye are all priests,' that is to say, the meaning of the existence of a Christian Church is to raise up a cloud of witnesses, and make every lip vocal with the name of Jesus Christ the Lord. And you, dear brethren, you, the idlers of a church and

congregation, are doing all that you can to thwart the divine purpose, and to destroy the very meaning of the existence of the church to which you belong.

And let me remind you, too, that such silence is clearly contrary to all Christian principle, inasmuch as one main purpose of the Gospel being given us is to shift our centre from ourselves, first to Christ, and then, if I may so say, to others. The very thing from which Christianity is meant to deliver us is the very thing that these idle, silent believers are indulging in, namely, the possession of God's gifts for their own profit and enjoyment. What is the use of your saying that you are Christian people if, in your very religion, you are practising the very vice that Jesus Christ has come to destroy? Selfishness is the opposite, the formal contradiction, of Christianity, and in the measure in which your religion is self-regarding, it is no religion at all. You are doing your best to counterwork the very main purpose of the Gospel upon yourselves, when in silence you possess, or fancy that you possess, the gift of His love.

And then, still further, let me remind you that this absolutely un-Christian character of silence is manifested, if you consider that the end of the Gospel for each of us is to bring us into full and happy sympathy with Christ, and likeness to Him. And how is that purpose being effected in His professed 'followers,' if they know nothing of the experience of looking on the world with Christ's eyes, or of the thrill of pity caught from Him, and have no sympathy with, in the sense of any reflected experience of, the sense of obligation to help the helpless which nailed Him to the Cross? We say that we are followers of One who 'so loved the world' that He died for it; we say that we long to be

transformed into His likeness, and yet we put away from ourselves the spirit that regards our brethren as He regarded us all; and never dream of copying, howsoever feebly in our lives and efforts, the pattern that was set before us in His death.

O dear brethren! 'if a man see his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion against him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?' And if a Christian looks upon a world without Christ, and has only a tepid sympathy and a faint realisation of the misery, and never does anything to lighten it by a grain, how can he pretend that he takes Jesus Christ for his Pattern and Example? Silence is manifestly a sin by reason of its inhumanity, and its contrariety to every principle of the Gospel.

III. Now, still further, let me point you to the retribution on silence.

These four men, no doubt, had some superstitious idea that mischief might come to them in the darkness. But they expressed a truth when they said, 'If we be silent, some evil'—or, as the word might be translated, 'some *punishment* will find us.' I desire to lay this on your hearts, dear brethren, that like all other selfish things, the silence of the Christian does him harm instead of good.

For instance, if you want to learn anything, set yourself to teach it. In trying to spread the name of Jesus Christ by your own personal effort, you will get a firmer hold of the truths that you attempt to impress upon others. I do not know any better cure for a great deal of unwholesome and superfluous speculation than to go into the slums and see what it is that tells there. That is a test of what is central and what is surface, in Christianity. I do not know any better dis-

cipline for a man whose religion is suffering from too much leisure and curiosity than to take a course of evangelistic work. He will find out then where the power is, and a great many cobwebs will be blown away. Be sure of this, that convictions unspoken, like plants grown in a cellar, will get very white in the stems, and will bear no fruit. Be sure of this, that a religion which is dumb will very soon tend to lose its possession of the truth, and that if you carry that great gift hid away in your heart it will be like locking up some singing-bird in a box. When you come to open it, the bird will be dead. There are, I have no doubt, many whom I am now addressing whose religion has all but, if not entirely, ebbed away from them, mainly because they have all their days been dumb Christians. That is one part of the punishment.

And another part is that silence is avenged by the dying out of the sympathies which inspire speech. It is the punishment of the selfish man that he becomes more selfish. It is the punishment of the heart, which never expands in sympathy, that its walls shrivel and contract, until there is scarcely blood enough between them to be impelled through the veins. Feelings which it is joy and nobleness to possess are nurtured and strengthened by expression; and the silent Christian is punished by becoming at last utterly indifferent to the woes of the world and to the spread of the Gospel. I think I could lay my finger, if I dared, on some of my audience who have got perilously near to that point.

And then again let me remind you that there is another form of the punishment, and that is the loss of all the blessed experience of the reaper's joy; and let me point you in a sentence to the final time of

retribution. There shall stand in that last day, as Scripture teaches us, humble workers before the Throne who will say, 'Behold! I, and the children whom Thou hast given me.' And there will stand some before the Throne, solitary; and I wonder if they will not feel lonely when they go into heaven, and find not a soul there to look them in the eyes and say, 'Thou didst lead me to the Christ, and I am here to welcome thee.' 'He that soweth and he that reapeth shall rejoice together.' Do you not think that then there will steal a shadow of shame across the spirit of the servant who stood idle in the market-place all the day with the wretched excuse, 'No man hath hired me,' when the Master had hired him beforehand, and given him such wages in advance?

O dear brethren! the cure for silence is to keep near that Master, and to drink in His Spirit; and then, as I beseech you to do, think, think, think of your obligations in the light of the Cross until you can say, 'Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints is this *grace given*,' not this burden imposed, 'that I, even I, should preach' the Name that is above every name. 'Open Thou my lips, and my mouth *shall* shew forth Thy praise.'

EXPOSITIONS OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

ALEXANDER MACLAREN, D. D., Litt. D.

SECOND KINGS FROM CHAP. VIII, AND CHRONICLES, EZRA, AND NEHEMIAH

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THE SECOND BOOK OF KINGS

THE STORY OF HAZAEL

'So Hazael went to meet him, and took a present with him, even of every good thing of Damascus, forty camels' burden, and came and stood before him, and said, Thy son Ben-hadad king of Syria hath sent me to thee, saying, Shall I recover of this disease? 10. And Elisha said unto him, Go, say unto him, Thou mayest certainly recover: howbeit the Lord hath shewed me that he shall surely die. 11. And he settled his countenance stedfastly, until he was ashamed: and the man of God wept. 12. And Hazael said, Why weepeth my lord? And he answered, Because I know the evil that thou wilt do unto the children of Israel: their strong holds wilt thou set on fire, and their young men wilt thou slay with the sword, and wilt dash their children, and rip up their women with child. 13. And Hazael said, But what, is thy servant a dog, that he should do this great thing? And Elisha answered, The Lord hath shewed me that thou shalt be king over Syria. 14. So he departed from Elisha, and came to his master; who said to him, What said Elisha to thee? and he answered, He told me that thou shouldest surely recover. 15. And it came to pass on the morrow, that he took a thick cloth, and dipped it in water, and spread it on his face, so that he died: and Hazael reigned in his stead.'—2 KINGS viii. 9-15.

THIS is a strange, wild story. That Damascene monarchy burst into sudden power, warlike and commercial—for the two things went together in those days. As is usually the case, Hazael the successful soldier becomes ambitious. His sword seems to be the real sceptre, and he will have the dominion. Many years before this Elijah had anointed him to be king over Syria. That had wrought upon him and stirred ambition in him. Elijah's other appointments, coeval with his own, had already taken effect, Jehu was king of Israel, Elisha was prophet, and he only had not attained the dignity to which he had been designated.

He comes now with his message from the king of Damascus to Elisha. No doubt he had been often

contrasting his own vigour with the decrepit, nominal king, and many a time had thought of the anointing, and had nursed ambitious hopes, which gradually turned to dark resolves.

He hoped, no doubt, that Ben-hadad was mortally sick, and it must have been a cruel, crushing disappointment when he heard that there was nothing deadly in the illness. Another hope was gone from him. The throne seemed further off than ever. I suppose that, at that instant, there sprang in his heart the resolve that he would kill Ben-hadad. The recoil of disappointment spurred Hazael to the resolution which he then and there took. It had been gathering form, no doubt, through some years, but now it became definite and settled. While his face glowed with the new determination, and his lips clenched themselves in the firmness of his purpose, the even voice of the prophet went on, 'howbeit he shall certainly die,' and the eye of the man of God searched him till he turned away ashamed because aware that his inmost heart was read.

Then there followed the prophet's weeping, and the solemn announcement of what Hazael would do when he had climbed to the throne. He shrank in real horror from the thought of such enormity of sin. 'Is thy servant a dog that he should do such a thing?' Elisha sternly answers: 'The Lord hath shewed me that thou shalt be king over Syria.' The certainty is that in his character occasion will develop evil. The certainty is that a course begun by such crime will be of a piece, and consistent with itself.

This conversation with Elisha seems to have accelerated Hazael's purpose, as if the prediction were to his mind a justification of his means of fulfilling it.

How like Macbeth he is!—the successful soldier,

stirred by supernatural monitions of a greatness which he should achieve, and at last a murderer.

This narrative opens to us some of the solemn, dark places of human life, of men's hearts, of God's ways. Let us look at some of the lessons which lie here.

I. Man's responsibility for the sin which God foresees.

It seems as if the prophet's words had much to do in exciting the ambitious desires which led to the crime. Hazaël's purpose of executing the deed is clearly known to the prophet. His ascending the throne is part of the divine purpose. He could find excuses for his guilt, and fling the responsibility for firing his ambition on the divine messenger. It may be asked—What sort of God is this who works on the mind of a man by exciting promises, and having done so, and having it fixed in His purposes that the man is to do the crime, yet treats it when done as guilt?

But now, whatever you may say, or whatever excuses Hazaël might have found for himself, here is just in its most naked form that which is true about all sin. God foresees it all. God puts men into circumstances where they will fall, God presents to them things which they will make temptations. God takes the consequences of their wrongdoing and works them into His great scheme. That is undeniable on one side, and on the other it is as undeniable that God's foreseeing leaves men free. God's putting men into circumstances where they fall is not His tempting them. God's non-prevention of sin is not permission to sin. God's overruling the consequences of sin is not His condoning of sin as part of the scheme of His providence.

Man is free. Man is responsible. God hates sin. God foresees and permits sin.

It is all a terrible mystery, but the facts are as undeniable as the mystery of their co existence is inscrutable.

II. The slumbering possibilities of sin.

Hazael indignantly protests against the thought that he should do such a thing. There is conscience left in him yet. His example suggests how little any of us know what it is in us to be or to do. We are all of us a mystery to ourselves. Slumbering powers lie in us. We are like quiescent volcanoes.

So much in us lies dormant, needing occasion for its development, like seeds that may sleep for centuries. That is true in regard to both the good and the bad in us. Life reveals us to ourselves. We learn to know ourselves by our actions, better than by mental self-inspection.

All sin is one in essence, and may pass into diverse forms according to circumstances. Of course characters differ, but the root of sin is in us all. We are largely good because not tempted, as a house may well stand firm when there are no floods. By the nature of the case, thorough self-knowledge is impossible.

Sin has the power of blinding us to its presence. It comes in a cloud as the old gods were fabled to do. The lungs get accustomed to a vitiated atmosphere, and scarcely are conscious of oppression till they cease to play.

All this should teach us—

Lessons of wary walking and humility. We are good because we have not been tried.

Lessons of charity and brotherly kindness. Every thief in the hulks, every prostitute on the streets, is our

brother and sister, and they prove their fraternity by their sin. 'Whatever man has done man may do.' '*Nihil humanum alienum a me puto.*' 'Let him that is without sin cast the first stone.'

III. The fatal necessity by which sin repeats itself in aggravated forms.

See how Hazael is drifted into his worst crimes. His first one leads on by fell necessity to others. A man who has done no sin is conceivable, but a man who has done only one is impossible. Did you ever see a dam bursting or breaking down? Through a little crack comes one drop: will it stop there—the gap or the trickle? No! The drop has widened the crack, it has softened the earth around, it has cleared away some impediments. So another and another follow ever more rapidly, until the water pours out in a flood and the retaining embankment is swept away.

No sin 'is dead, being alone.' The demon brings seven other devils worse than himself. The reason for that aggravation is plain.

There is, first, habit.

There is, second, growing inclination.

There is, third, weakened restraint.

There is, fourth, a craving for excitement to still conscience.

There is, fifth, the necessity of the man's position.

There is, sixth, the strange love of consistency which tones all life down or up to one tint, as near as may be. There comes at last despair.

But not merely does every sin tend to repeat itself and to draw others after it. It tends to repeat itself in aggravated forms. There is growth, the law of increase as well as of perpetuity. The seed produces 'some sixty and some an hundredfold.'

And so the slaughtered soldiers and desolated homesteads of Israel were the sequel of the cloth on Ben-hadad's face. The secret of much enormous crime is the kind of relief from conscience which is found in committing a yet greater sin. The Furies drive with whips of scorpions, and the poor wretch goes plunging and kicking deeper and deeper in the mire, further and further from the path. So you can never say: 'I will only do this one wrong thing.'

We see here how powerless against sin are all restraints. The prophecy did not prevent Hazael from his sins. The clear sense that they were sins did not prevent him. The horror-struck shudder of conscience did not prevent him. It was soon gagged.

Hear, then, the conclusion of the whole matter. Christ reveals us to ourselves. Christ breaks the chain of sin, makes a new beginning, cuts off the entail, reverses the irreversible, erases the indelible, cancels the irrevocable, forgives all the faultful past, and by the power of His love in the soul, works a mightier miracle than changing the Ethiopian's skin; teaches them that are accustomed to evil to do well, and though sins be as scarlet, makes them white as snow. He gives us a cleansed past and a bright future, and out of all our sins and wasted years makes pardoned sinners and glorified, perfected saints.

IMPURE ZEAL

'And Jehu gathered all the people together, and said unto them, Ahab served Baal a little; but Jehu shall serve him much. 19. Now therefore call unto me all the prophets of Baal, all his servants, and all his priests; let none be wanting: for I have a great sacrifice to do to Baal; whosoever shall be wanting, he shall not live. But Jehu did it in subtilty, to the intent that he might destroy the worshippers of Baal. 20. And Jehu said, Proclaim a solemn assembly for Baal. And they proclaimed it. 21. And Jehu sent through all Israel: and all the worshippers of Baal came, so that there was not a man left that came not. And they came into the house

of Baal; and the house of Baal was full from one end to another. 22. And he said unto him that was over the vestry, Bring forth vestments for all the worshippers of Baal. And he brought them forth vestments. 23. And Jehu went, and Jehonadab the son of Rechab, into the house of Baal, and said unto the worshippers of Baal, Search, and look that there be here with you none of the servants of the Lord, but the worshippers of Baal only. 24. And when they went in to offer sacrifices and burnt offerings, Jehu appointed fourscore men without, and said, If any of the men whom I have brought into your hands escape, he that letteth him go, his life shall be for the life of him. 25. And it came to pass, as soon as he had made an end of offering the burnt offering, that Jehu said to the guard and to the captains, Go in, and slay them; let none come forth. And they smote them with the edge of the sword; and the guard and the captains cast them out, and went to the city of the house of Baal. 26. And they brought forth the images out of the house of Baal, and burned them. 27. And they brake down the image of Baal, and brake down the house of Baal, and made it a draught house unto this day. 28. Thus Jehu destroyed Baal out of Israel. 29. Howbeit from the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin, Jehu departed not from after them, to wit, the golden calves that were in Beth-el, and that were in Dan. 30. And the Lord said unto Jehu, Because thou hast done well in executing that which is right in Mine eyes, and hast done unto the house of Ahab according to all that was in Mine heart, thy children of the fourth generation shall sit on the throne of Israel. 31. But Jehu took no heed to walk in the law of the Lord God of Israel with all his heart: for he departed not from the sins of Jeroboam, which made Israel to sin.—2 KINGS x. 18-31.

THE details of this story of bloodshed need little elucidation. Jehu had 'driven furiously' to some purpose. Secrecy and swiftness joined to unhesitating severity had crushed the dynasty of Ahab, which fell unlamented and unsupported, as if lightning-struck. The nobler elements had gathered to Jehu, as represented by the Rechabite, Jehonadab, evidently a Jehovah worshipper, and closely associated with the fierce soldier in this chapter. Jehu first secured his position, and then smote the Baal worship as heavily and conclusively as he had done the royal family. He struck once, and struck no more; for the single blow pulverised.

The audacious pretext of an intention to outdo the fallen dynasty in Baal worship must have sounded strange to those who knew how his massacre of Ahab's house had been represented by him as fulfilling Jehovah's purpose, but it was not too gross to be believed. So we can fancy the joyous revival of hope with which from every corner of the land the Baal priests, prophets, and worshippers, recovered from

their fright, came flocking to the great temple in Samaria, till it was like a cup filled with wine from brim to brim. The worship cannot have numbered many adherents if one temple could hold the bulk of them. Probably it had never been more than a court fashion, and, now that Jezebel was dead, had lost ground. A token of royal favour was given to each of the crowd, in the gift of a vestment from the royal wardrobe. Then Jehu himself, accompanied by the ascetic Jehonadab, entered the court of the temple, a strangely assorted pair, and a couple of very 'distinguished' converts. The Baal priests would thrill with gratified pride when these two came to worship. The usual precautions against the intrusion of non-worshippers were taken at Jehu's command, but with a sinister meaning, undreamed of by the eager searchers. That was a sifting for destruction, not for preservation. So they all passed into the inner court to offer sacrifice.

The story gives a double picture in verse 24. Within are the jubilant worshippers; without, the grim company of their executioners, waiting the signal to draw their swords and burst in on the unarmed mob. Jehu carried his deception so far that he himself offered the burnt offering, with Jehonadab standing by, and then withdrew, followed, no doubt, by grateful acclamations. A step or two brought him to the 'eighty men without.' Two stern words, 'Go, smite them,' are enough. They storm in, and 'the songs of the temple' are turned to 'howlings in that day.' The defenceless, surprised crowd, huddled together in the dimly lighted shrine, were massacred to a man. The innermost sanctuary was then wrecked, corpses and statues thrown pell-mell into the outer courts or beyond the

precincts, fires lit to burn the abominations, and busy hands, always more ready for pillage and destruction than for good work, pulled down the temple, the ruins of which were turned to base uses. The writer, picturing the wild scene, sums up with a touch of exultation: 'Thus Jehu destroyed Baal out of Israel'—where note the emphatic prominence of the three names of the king, the god, and the nation. That is the vindication of the terrible deed.

Now the main interest of this passage lies in its disclosure of the strangely mingled character of Jehu, and in the fact that his bloody severity was approved by God, and rewarded by the continuance of his dynasty for a longer time than any other on the throne of Israel.

Jehu was influenced by 'zeal for the Lord,' however much smoke mingled with the flame. He acted under the conviction that he was God's instrument, and at each new deed of blood asserted his fulfilment of prophecy. His profession to Jehonadab (ver. 16) was not hypocrisy nor ostentation. The Rechabite sheikh was evidently a man of mark, and apparently one of the leaders of those who had not 'bowed the knee to Baal'; and Jehu's disclosure of his animating motive was meant to secure the alliance of that party through one of its chiefs. No doubt many elements of selfishness and many stains mingled with Jehu's zeal. It was much on the same level as the fanaticism of the immediate successors of Mohammed; but, low as it was, look at its power. Jehu swept like a whirlwind, or like leaping fire among stubble, from Ramoth to Jezreel, from Jezreel to Samaria, and nothing stood before his fierce onset. Promptitude, decision, secrecy, —the qualities which carry enterprises to success—

marked his character; partly, no doubt, from natural temperament, for God chooses right instruments, but from temperament heightened and invigorated by the conviction of being the instrument whom God had chosen. We may learn how even a very imperfect form of this conviction gives irresistible force to a man, annihilates fear, draws the teeth of danger, and gathers up all one's faculties to a point which can pierce any opposition. We may all recognise that God has sent us on His errands; and if we cherish that conviction, we shall put away from us slothfulness and fear, and out of weakness shall be made strong.

But Jehu sets forth the possible imperfections of 'zeal for the Lord.' We may defer for a moment the consideration of the morality of his slaughter of the royal house and the Baal worshippers, and point to the taint of selfishness and to the leaven of deceit in his enthusiasm. We have not to analyse it. That is God's work. But clearly the object which he had in view was not merely fulfilment of prophecy, but securing the throne; and there was more passion, as well as selfish policy, in his massacres, than befitted a minister of the divine justice, who should let no anger disturb the solemnity of his terrible task. Such dangers ever attend the path of the great men who feel themselves to be sent by God. In our humbler lives they dog our steps, and religious fervour needs ever to keep careful watch on itself, lest it should degenerate unconsciously into self-will, and should allow the muddy stream of earth-born passion to darken its crystal waters.

Many a great name in the annals of the Church has fallen before that temptation. We all need to remember that 'the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God,' and to take heed lest we should

be guided by our own stormy impatience of contradiction, and by a determination to have our own way, while we think ourselves the humble instruments of a divine purpose. There was a 'Zelotes' in the Apostolate; but the coarse, sanguinary 'zeal' of his party must have needed much purifying before it learned what manner of spirit the zeal of a true disciple was of.

Another point of interest is the divine emphatic approval of Jehu's bloody acts (ver. 30). The massacre of the Baal worshippers is not included in the acts which God declares to have been 'according to all that was in Mine heart,' and it may be argued that it was not part of Jehu's commission. Certainly the accompanying deceit was not 'right in God's eyes,' but the slaughter in Baal's temple was the natural sequel of the civil revolution, and is most probably included in the deeds approved.

Perhaps Elisha brought Jehu the message in verse 30. If so, what a contrast between the two instruments of God's purposes! At all events, Jehovah's approval was distinctly given. What then? There need be no hesitation in recognising the progressive character of Scripture morality, as well as the growth of the revelation of the divine character, of which the morality of each epoch is the reflection. The full revelation of the God of love had to be preceded by the clear revelation of the God of righteousness; and whilst the Old Testament does make known the love of God in many a gracious act and word, it especially teaches His righteous condemnation of sin, without which His love were mere facile indulgence and impunity. The slaughter of that wicked house of Ahab and of the Baal priests was the act of divine justice, and the question is simply whether that justice

was entitled to slay them. To that question believers in a divine providence can give but one answer. The destruction of Baal worship and the annihilation of its stronghold in Ahab's family were sufficient reasons, as even we can see, for such a deed. To bring in Jehu into the problem is unnecessary. He was the sword, but God's was the hand that struck. It is not for men to arraign the Lord of life and death for His methods and times of sending death to evil-doers. Granted that the 'long-suffering' which is 'not willing that any should perish' speaks more powerfully to our hearts than the justice which smites with death, the later and more blessed revelation is possible and precious only on the foundation of the former. Nor will a loose-braced generation like ours, which affects to be horrified at the thought of the 'wrath of God,' and recoils from the contemplation of His judgments, ever reach the innermost secrets of the tenderness of His love.

From the merely human point of view, we may say that revolutions are not made with rose-water, and that, at all crises in a nation's history, when some ancient evil is to be thrown off, and some powerful system is to be crushed, there will be violence, at which easy-going people, who have never passed through like times, will hold up their hands in horror and with cheap censure. No doubt we have a higher law than Jehu knew, and Christ has put His own gentle commandment of love in the place of what was 'said to them of old time.' But let us, while we obey it for ourselves, and abjure violence and blood, judge the men of old 'according to that which they had, and not according to that which they had not.' Jehu's bloody deeds are not held up for admiration. His obedience is what

is praised and rewarded. Well for us if we obey our better law as faithfully!

The last point in the story is the imperfection of the obedience of Jehu. He contented himself with rooting out Baal, but left the calves. That shows the impurity of his 'zeal,' which flamed only against what it was for his advantage to destroy, and left the more popular and older idolatry undisturbed. Obedience has to be 'all in all, or not at all.' We may not 'compound for sins we are inclined to, by' zeal against those 'we have no mind to.' Our consciences are apt to have insensitive spots in them, like witch-marks. We often think it enough to remove the grosser evils, and leave the less, but white ants will eat up a carcass faster than a lion. Putting away Baal is of little use if we keep the calves at Dan and Beth-el. Nothing but walking in the law of the Lord 'with all the heart' will secure our walking safely. 'Unite my heart to fear Thy name' needs to be our daily prayer. 'One foot on sea and one on shore' is not the attitude in which steadfastness or progress is possible.

JEHOIADA AND JOASH

'And when Athaliah the mother of Ahaziah saw that her son was dead, she arose and destroyed all the seed royal. 2. But Jehosheba, the daughter of king Joram, sister of Ahaziah, took Joash the son of Ahaziah, and stole him from among the king's sons which were slain; and they hid him, even him and his nurse, in the bedchamber from Athaliah, so that he was not slain. 3. And he was with her hid in the house of the Lord six years. And Athaliah did reign over the land. 4. And the seventh year Jehoiada sent and fetched the rulers over hundreds, with the captains and the guard, and brought them to him into the house of the Lord, and made a covenant with them, and took an oath of them in the house of the Lord, and shewed them the king's son. 5. And he commanded them, saying, This is the thing that ye shall do; A third part of you that enter in on the sabbath shall even be keepers of the watch of the king's house; 6. And a third part shall be at the gate of Sur; and a third part at the gate behind the guard: so shall ye keep the watch of the house, that it be not broken down. 7. And two parts of all you that go forth on the sabbath, even they shall keep the watch of the house of the Lord about the king. 8. And ye shall compass the king round

about, every man with his weapons in his hand: and he that cometh within the ranges, let him be slain: and be ye with the king as he goeth out and as he cometh in. 9. And the captains over the hundreds did according to all things that Jehoiada the priest commanded: and they took every man his men that were to come in on the sabbath, with them that should go out on the sabbath, and came to Jehoiada the priest. 10. And to the captains over hundreds did the priest give king David's spears and shields, that were in the temple of the Lord. 11. And the guard stood, every man with his weapons in his hand, round about the king, from the right corner of the temple to the left corner of the temple, along by the altar and the temple. 12. And he brought forth the king's son, and put the crown upon him, and gave him the testimony; and they made him king, and anointed him; and they clapped their hands, and said, God save the king. 13. And when Athaliah heard the noise of the guard and of the people, she came to the people into the temple of the Lord. 14. And when she looked, behold, the king stood by a pillar, as the manner was, and the princes and the trumpeters by the king, and all the people of the land rejoiced, and blew with trumpets: and Athaliah rent her clothes, and cried, Treason, Treason. 15. But Jehoiada the priest commanded the captains of the hundreds, the officers of the host, and said unto them, Have her forth without the ranges: and him that followeth her kill with the sword. For the priest had said, Let her not be slain in the house of the Lord. 16. And they laid hands on her; and she went by the way by the which the horses came into the king's house: and there was she slain.—2 KINGS xl. 1-16.

THE king of Judah has been killed, his alliance with the king of Israel having involved him in the latter's fate. Jehu had also murdered 'the brethren of Ahaziah,' forty-two in number. Next, Athaliah, the mother of Ahaziah and a daughter of Ahab, killed all the males of the royal family, and planted herself on the throne. She had Jezebel's force of character, unscrupulousness and disregard of human life. She was a tigress of a woman, and, no doubt, her six years' usurpation was stained with blood and with the nameless abominations of Baal worship. Never had the kingdom of Judah been at a lower ebb. One infant was all that was left of David's descendants. The whole promises of God seemed to depend for fulfilment on one little, feeble life. The tree had been cut down, and there was but this one sucker pushing forth a tiny shoot from 'the root of Jesse.'

We have in the passage, first, the six years of hiding in the temple. It is a pathetic picture, that of the infant rescued by his brave aunt from the blood-bath, and stowed away in the storeroom where the mats and

cushions which served for beds were kept when not in use, watched over by two loving and courageous women, and taught infantile lessons by the husband of his aunt, Jehoiada the high priest. Many must have been aware of his existence, and there must have been loyal guarding of the secret, or Athaliah's sword would have been reddened with the baby's blood. Like the child Samuel, he had the Temple for his home, and his first impressions would be of daily sacrifices and white-robed priests. It was a better school for him than if he had been in the palace close by. The opening flower would have been soon besmirched there, but in the holy calm of the Temple courts it unfolded unstained. A Christian home should breathe the same atmosphere as surrounded Joash, and it, too, should be a temple, where holy peace rules, and where the first impressions printed on plastic little minds are of God and His service.

We have next the disclosure and coronation of the boy king. The narrative here has to be supplemented from that in 2 Chron. xxiii., which does not contradict that in this passage, as is often said, but completes it. It informs us that before the final scene in the Temple, Jehoiada had in Jerusalem assembled a large force of Levites and of the 'heads of the fathers' houses' from all the kingdom. That statement implies that the revolution was mainly religious in its motive, and was national in its extent. Obviously Jehoiada would have been courting destruction for Joash and himself unless he had made sure of a strong backing before he hoisted the standard of the house of David. There must, therefore, have been long preparation and much stir; and all the while the foreign woman was sitting in the palace, close by the Temple, and not a whisper reached her. Evidently she had no party in Judah, and

held her own only by her indomitable will and by the help of foreign troops. Anybody who remembers how the Austrians in Italy were shunned, will understand how Athaliah heard nothing of the plot that was rapidly developing a stone's throw from her isolated throne. Strange delusion, to covet such a seat, yet no stranger than many another mistaking of serpents for fish, into which we fall!

Jehoiada's caution was as great as his daring. He does not appear to have given the Levites and elders any inkling of his purpose till he had them safe in the Temple, and then he opened his mind, swore them to stand by him, and 'showed them the king's son.' What a scene that would be—the seven-year-old child there among all these strange men, the joyful surprise flashing in their eyes, the exultation of the faithful women that had watched him so lovingly, the stern facing of the dangers ahead. Most of the assembly must have thought that none of David's house remained, and that thought would have had much to do with their submitting to Athaliah's usurpation. Now that they saw the true heir, they could not hesitate to risk their lives to set him on his throne. Show a man his true king, and many a tyranny submitted to before becomes at once intolerable. The boy Joash makes Athaliah look very ugly.

Jehoiada's plans are somewhat difficult to understand, owing to our ignorance of the details as to the usual arrangements of the guards of the palace, but the general drift of them is plain enough. The main thing was to secure the person of the king, and, for that purpose, the two companies of priests who were relieved on the Sabbath were for once kept on duty, and their numbers augmented by the company that would, in the ordinary

course, have relieved them. This augmented force was so disposed as, first, to secure the Temple from attack, and, second, to 'compass the king'—in his chamber, that is. We learn from 2 Chronicles that it consisted of priests and Levites, and some would see in that statement a tampering with the account in this passage, in the interests of a later conception of the sanctity of the Temple and of the priestly order. Our narrative is said to make the foreign mercenaries of the palace guard the persons referred to; but surely that cannot be maintained in the face of the plain statement of verse 7, that they kept the watch of the Temple, for that was the office of the priests. Besides, how should foreign soldiers have needed to be armed from the Temple armoury? And is it probable on the face of it that the palace guard, who were Athaliah's men, and therefore antagonistic to Joash, and Baal worshippers, should have been gained over to his side, or should have been the guards of the house of Jehovah? If, however, we understand that these guards were Levites, all is plain, and the arming of them with 'the spears and shields that had been king David's' becomes intelligible, and would rouse them to enthusiasm and daring.

Not till all these dispositions for the boy king's safety, and for preventing an assault on the Temple, had been carried out, did the prudent Jehoiada venture to bring Joash out from his place of concealment. Note that in verse 12 he is not called 'the king,' as in the previous verses, but, as in verse 4, 'the king's son.' He was king by right, but not technically, till he had been presented to, and accepted by, the representatives of the people, had had 'the testimony' placed in his hands, and been anointed by the high-priest. So 'they made him king.' The three parts of the ceremony were all

significant. The delivering of 'the testimony' (the Book of the Law—Deut. xvii. 18, 19) taught him that he was no despot to rule by his own pleasure and for his own glory, but the viceroy of the true King of Judah, and himself subject to law. The people's making him king taught him and them that a true royalty rules over willing subjects, and both guarded the rights of the nation and set limits to the power of the ruler. The priest's anointing witnessed to the divine appointment of the monarch and the divine endowment with fitness for his office. Would that these truths were more recognised and felt by all rulers! What a different thing the page of history would be!

The vigilance of the tigress had been eluded, and Athaliah had a rude awakening. But she had her mother's courage, and as soon as she heard in the palace the shouts, she dashed to the Temple, alone as she was, and fronted the crowd. The sight might have made the boldest quail. Who was that child standing in the royal place? Where had he come from? How had he been hidden all these years? What was all this frenzy of rejoicing, this blare of trumpets, these ranks of grim men with weapons in their hands? The stunning truth fell on her; but, though she felt that all was lost, not a whit did she blench, but fronted them all as proudly as ever. One cannot but admire the dauntless woman, 'magnificent in sin.' But her cry of 'Treason! treason!' brought none to her side. As she stood solitary there, she must have felt that her day was over, and that nothing remained but to die like a queen. Proudly as ever, she passed down the ranks and not a face looked pity on her, nor a voice blessed her. She was reaping what she had sown, and she who had killed without compunction the innocents who stood between her

and her ambitions, was pitilessly slain, and all the land rejoiced at her death.

So ended the all but bloodless revolution which crushed Baal worship in Judah. It had been begun by Elijah and Elisha, but it was completed by a high priest. It was religious even more than political. It was a national movement, though Jehoiada's courage and wisdom engineered it to its triumph. It teaches us how God watches over His purposes and their instruments when they seem nearest to failure, for one poor infant was all that was left of the seed of David; and how, therefore, we are never to despair, even in the darkest hour, of the fulfilment of His promises. It teaches us how much one brave, good man and woman can do to change the whole face of things, and how often there needs but one man to direct and voice the thoughts and acts of the silent multitude, and to light a fire that consumes evil.

METHODICAL LIBERALITY

'And Jehoshaphat said to the priests, All the money of the dedicated things that is brought into the house of the Lord, even the money of every one that passeth the account, the money that every man is set at, and all the money that cometh into any man's heart to bring into the house of the Lord. 5. Let the priests take it to them, every man of his acquaintance; and let them repair the breaches of the house, wheresoever any breach shall be found. 6. But it was so, that in the three and twentieth year of king Jehoshaphat the priests had not repaired the breaches of the house. 7. Then king Jehoshaphat called for Jehoiada the priest, and the other priests, and said unto them, Why repair ye not the breaches of the house? Now therefore receive no more money of your acquaintance, but deliver it for the breaches of the house. 8. And the priests consented to receive no more money of the people, neither to repair the breaches of the house. 9. But Jehoiada the priest took a chest, and bored a hole in the lid of it, and set it beside the altar, on the right side as one cometh into the house of the Lord; and the priests that kept the door put therein all the money that was brought into the house of the Lord. 10. And it was so, when they saw that there was much money in the chest, that the king's scribe and the high priest came up, and they put up in bags, and told the money that was found in the house of the Lord. 11. And they gave the money, being told, into the hands of them that did the work, that had the oversight of the house of the Lord; and they laid it out to the carpenters and builders that wrought

upon the house of the Lord, 12. And to masons, and hewers of stone, and to buy timber and hewed stone to repair the breaches of the house of the Lord, and for all that was laid out for the house to repair it. 13. Howbeit there were not made for the house of the Lord bowls of silver, snuffers, basons, trumpets, any vessels of gold, or vessels of silver, of the money that was brought into the house of the Lord: 14. But they gave that to the workmen, and repaired therewith the house of the Lord. 15. Moreover they reckoned not with the men, into whose hand they delivered the money to be bestowed on workmen: for they dealt faithfully.—2 Kings xii. 4-15.

'THE sons of Athaliah, that wicked woman, had broken up the house of God,' says Chronicles. The dilapidation had not been complete, but had been extensive, as may be gathered from the large expenditure recorded in this passage for repairs, and the enumeration of the artisans employed. No doubt Joash was guided by Jehoiada in setting about the restoration, but the fact that he gives the orders, while the high priest is not mentioned, throws light on the relative position of the two authorities, and on the king's office as guardian of the Temple and official 'head of the church.' The story comes in refreshingly and strangely among the bloody pages in which it is embedded, and it suggests some lessons as to the virtue of plain common sense and business principles applied to religious affairs. If 'the outward business of the house of God' were always guided with as much practical reasonableness as Joash brought to bear on it, there would be fewer failures or sarcastic critics.

We note, first, the true source of money for religious purposes. There was a fixed amount for which 'each man is rated,' and that made the minimum, but there was also that which 'cometh into any man's heart to bring,' and that was infinitely more precious than the exacted tax. The former was appropriate to the Old Testament, of which the animating principle was law and the voice: 'Thou shalt' or 'Thou shalt not.' The latter alone fits the New Testament, of which

the animating principle is love and the voice: 'Though I have all boldness in Christ to enjoin thee . . . yet for love's sake I rather beseech.' What disasters and what stifling of the spirit of Christian liberality have marred the Church for many centuries, and in many lands, because the great anachronism has prevailed of binding its growing limbs in Jewish swaddling bands, and degrading Christian giving into an assessment! And how shrunk the stream that is squeezed out by such a process, compared with the abundant gush of the fountain of love opened in a grateful, trusting heart!

Next, we have the negligent, if not dishonest, officials. We do not know how long Joash tried the experiment of letting the priests receive the money and superintend the repairs; but probably the restoration project was begun early in his reign, and if so, he gave the experiment of trusting all to the officials, a fair, patient trial, till the twenty-third year of his reign. Years gone and nothing done, or at least nothing completed! We do not need to accuse them of intentional embezzlement, but certainly they were guilty of carelessly letting the money slip through their fingers, and a good deal of it stick to their hands. It is always the temptation of the clergy to think of their own support as a first charge on the church, nor is it quite unheard of that the ministry should be less enthusiastic in religious objects than the 'laity,' and should work the enthusiasm of the latter for their own advantage. Human nature is the same in Jerusalem in Joash's time, and to-day in Manchester, or New York, or Philadelphia, and all men who live by the gifts of Christian people have need to watch themselves, lest they, like Ezekiel's false shepherds, feed themselves

and not the flock, and seek the wool and the fat and not the good of the sheep.

Next we have the application of businesslike methods to religious work. It was clearly time to take the whole matter out of the priests' hands, and Joash is not afraid to assume a high tone with the culprits, and even with Jehoiada as their official head. He was in some sense responsible for his subordinates, and probably, though his own hands were clean, he may have been too lax in looking after the disposal of the funds. Note that while Joash rebuked the priests, and determined the new arrangements, it was Jehoiada who carried them out and provided the chest for receiving the contributions. The king wills, the high priest executes, the rank and file of the priests, however against the grain, consent. The arrangement for collecting the contributions 'saved the faces' of the priests to some extent, for the gifts were handed to them, and by them put into the chest. But, of course, that was done at once, in the donor's presence. If changes involving loss of position are to work smoothly, it is wise to let the deposed officials down as easily as may be.

Similar common sense is shown in the second step, the arrangement for ascertaining the amounts given. The king's secretary and the high-priest (or a representative) jointly opened the chest, counted and bagged up the money. They checked each other, and prevented suspicion on either side. No man who regards his own reputation will consent to handle public money without some one to stand over him and see what he does with it. One would be wise always to suspect people who appeal for help 'for the Lord's work' and are too 'spiritual' to have such worldly things as

committees or auditors of their books. Accurate accounts are as essential to Christian work as spirituality or enthusiasm. The next stage was to hand over the money to the 'contractors,' as we should call them; and there similar precautions were taken against possible peculation on the part of the two officials who had received the money, for it was apparently 'weighed out into the hands' of the overseers, who would thus be able to check what they received by what the secretary and the high-priest had taken from the chest, and would be responsible for the expenditure of the amount which the two officials knew that they had received.

But all this system of checks seems to break down at the very point where it should have worked most searchingly, for 'they reckoned not with the men, into whose hand they delivered the money' to pay the workmen, 'for they dealt faithfully.' That last clause looks like a hit at the priests who had not dealt so, and contrasts the methods of plain business men of no pretensions, with those of men whose very calling should have guaranteed their trustworthiness. The contrast has been repeated in times and places nearer home. But another suggestion may also be made about this singular lapse into what looks like unwise confidence. These overseers had proved their faithfulness and earned the right to be trusted entirely, and the way to get the best out of a man, if he has any reliableness in him, is to trust him utterly, and to show him that you do. 'It is a shame to tell Arnold a lie; he always believes us,' said the Rugby boys about their great head-master. There is a time for using all precautions, and a time for using none. Businesslike methods do not consist in spying at the

heels of one's agents, but in picking the right men, and, having proved them, giving them a free hand. And is not that what the great Lord and Employer does with His servants, and is it not part of the reason why Jesus gets more out of us than any one else can do, that He trusts us more?

One more point may be noticed; namely, the order of precedence in which the necessary works were done. Not a coin went to provide the utensils for sacrifice till the Temple was completely repaired. After they had 'set up the house of God in its state,' as Chronicles tells us, they took the balance of the funds to the king and Jehoiada, and spent that on 'vessels for the house.' A clear insight to discern what most needs to be done, and a firm resolve to 'do the duty that lies nearest thee,' and to let everything else, however necessary, wait till it is done, is a great part of Christian prudence, and goes far to make works or lives truly prosperous. 'First things first'!—it is a maxim that carries us far and as right as far.

THE SPIRIT OF POWER

'And Elisha said to the king of Israel, Put thine hand upon the bow. And he put his hand upon it: and Elisha put his hands upon the king's hands.'—2 KINGS xiii. 16.

THIS is part of one of the strangest narratives in the Old Testament. Elisha is on his deathbed, 'sick of the sickness' wherewith he 'should die.' A very different scene, that close sick-chamber, from the open plain beyond Jordan from which Elijah had gone up; a very different way of passing from life by wasting sickness than by fiery chariot! But God is as near His servants in the one place as in the other, and the slow wasting

away is as much His messenger as the sudden apocalypse of the horsemen of fire. The king of Israel comes to the old prophet, and very significantly repeats over him his own exclamation over Elijah, 'My father! My father! the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof.' Elisha takes no notice of the grief and reverence expressed by the exclamation, but goes straight to his work, and what follows is remarkable indeed.

Here is a prophet dying; and his last words are not edifying moral and religious reflections, nor does he seem to be much concerned to leave with the king his final protest against Israel's sin, but his thoughts are all of warfare, and his last effort is to stir up the sluggish young monarch to some of his own enthusiasm in the conflict with the enemy. It does not sound like an edifying deathbed. People might have said, 'Ah! secular and political affairs should be all out of a man's mind when he comes to his last moments.' But Elisha thought that to stick to his life's work till the last breath was out of him, and to devote the last breath to stimulating successors who might catch up the torch that dropped from his failing hands, was no unworthy end of a prophet's life.

So there followed what perhaps is not very familiar to some of us, that strange scene in which the dying man is far fuller of energy and vigour than the young king, and takes the upper hand of him, giving him a series of curt, authoritative commands, each of which he punctiliously obeys. 'Take bow and arrow,' and he took them. Then the prophet lays his wasted hand for a moment on the strong, young hand, and having thus either in symbol or reality—never mind which—communicated power, he says to him, 'Fling open the casement towards the quarter where the enemy's

territory lies,' and he flings it open. 'Now, shoot,' and he shoots. Then the old man gathers himself up on his bed, and with a triumphant shout exclaims, 'The Lord's arrow of victory! . . . Thou shalt smite the Syrians till they be consumed.'

That is not all. There is a second stage. The promise is given; the possibility is opened before the king, and now all depends on the question whether he will rise to the height of the occasion. So the prophet says to him, 'Take the sheaf of arrows in your hand'; and he takes them. And then he says, 'Now smite upon the ground.' It is a test. If he had been roused and stirred by what had gone before; if he had any earnestness of belief in the power that was communicated, and any eagerness of desire to realise the promises that had been given of complete victory, what would he have done? What would Elisha have done if *he* had had the quiver in his hand? This king smites three perfunctory taps on the floor, and having done what will satisfy the old man's whim, and what in decency he had to do, he stops, as if weary of the whole performance. So the prophet bursts out in indignation on his dying bed—'Thou shouldst have smitten five or six times; then hadst thou conquered utterly. Now thou shalt conquer but thrice.' A strange story; very far away from our atmosphere and latitude! Yet are there not obviously in it great principles which may be disentangled from their singular setting, and fully applied to us? I think so. Let us try and draw them from it.

I. Here we have the power communicated.

Now the story seems to indicate that it was only for a moment that the prophet's hands were laid on the king's hands, because, after they had been so laid, he is

bidden to go to the window and fling it open, and the bedridden man could not go there with him; then he is bidden to draw the bow, and another hand upon his would have been a hindrance rather than a help. So it was but a momentary touch, a communication of power in reality or in symbol that the muscular young hand needed, and the wasted old one could give. And is that not a parable for us? We, too, if we are Christian men and women, have a gospel of which the very kernel is that there is to us a communication of power, and the very name of that divine Spirit whom it is Christ's greatest work to send flashing and flaming through the world, is the 'Spirit of Power.' And so the old promise that ye shall be clothed with strength from on high is the standing prerogative of the Christian Church. There is not merely some partial communication, as when hand touched hand, but every organ is vitalised and quickened; as in the case of the other miracle of this prophet, when he stretched himself on the dead child eye to eye, and mouth to mouth, and hand to hand; and each part received the vitalising influence. We have, if we are Christian people, a Spirit given to us, and are 'strengthened with might by the Spirit in the inner man.'

That gift, that strength comes to us by contact, not with Elisha, but with Elisha's Lord and Master. Christ's touch, when He was on earth, brought sight to the blind, healing to the sick, vigour to the limbs of the lame, life to the dead. And you and I can have that touch, far more truly, and far more mightily operative upon us than they had, who only felt the contact of His finger, and only derived corporeal blessing. For we can draw near to Him, and in union with Him by faith and love and obedience, can have His Spirit in

close contact with our spirits, and strengthening us for all service, and for every task. Brethren! that touch which gives strength is a real thing. It is no mere piece of mystical exaggeration when we speak of our spirits being in actual contact with Christ's Spirit. Many of us have no clear conception, and still less a firm realisation, of that closer than corporeal contact, more real than bodily presence, and more intimate than any possible physical union, which is the great gift of God in Jesus Christ, and brings to us, if we will, life and strength according to our need. I would that the popular Christianity of this day had a far larger infusion of the sound, mystical element that lies in the New Testament Christianity, and did not talk so exclusively about a Christ that is for us as to have all but lost sight of the second stage of our relation to Christ, and lost a faith in a Christ that is in us. Brethren! He can lay His hand upon your spirit's hand. He can flash light into your spirit's eye from His eye. He can put breath and eloquence into your spirit's lips from His lips, and His heart beating against yours can transfuse—if I may so say—into you His own life-blood, which cleanses from all sin, and fits for all conflict.

Then, further, let me remind you that this power, which is bestowed on condition of contact, is given before duties are commanded. This king, in our acted parable, first had the touch of Elisha's fingers, and then received the command from Elisha's lips, 'Shoot!' So Jesus Christ gives before He commands, and commands nothing which He has not fitted us to perform. He is not 'an austere man, reaping where He did not sow, and gathering where He did not straw'; but He comes first to us saying, 'I give thee Myself,' and then

He looks us in the eyes and says, 'Wilt thou not give Me thyself?' He bestows the strength first, and He commands the consequent duty afterwards.

Further, this strength communicated is realised in the effort to obey Christ's great commands. Joash felt nothing when the prophet's hand was laid upon his but perhaps, some tingling. But when he got the bow in his hand and drew the arrow to its head, the infused power stiffened his muscles and strengthened him to pull; and though he could not distinguish between his own natural corporeal ability and that which had been thus imparted to him, the two co-operated in the one act, and it was when he drew his bow that he felt his strength. 'Stretch forth thine hand,' said Christ to the lame man. But the very infirmity to be dealt with was his inability to stretch it forth. At the command he tried, and, to his wonder, the stiffened sinews relaxed, and the joint that had been immovable had free play, and he stretched out his hand, and it was restored whole as the other. So He gives what He commands, and in obeying the command we realise and are conscious of the power. Elisha and Joash but act an illustration of the great word of Paul: 'Work out your own salvation . . . for it is God that worketh in you.'

II. And now, secondly, look at the perfected victory that is possible.

When the arrows, by God's strength operating through Joash's arm, had been shot, the prophet says, 'The arrow of the Lord's victory! . . . thou shalt smite . . . till thou have consumed.' Yes, of course; if the arrow is the Lord's arrow, and the strength is His strength, then the only issue corresponding to the power is perfect victory. I would that Christian people realised more than they do practically in their

lives that while men's ideals and aims may be all unaccomplished, or but partially approximated to, since God is God, His nature is perfection, and nothing that He does can fall beneath His ideal and purpose in doing it. All that comes from Him must correspond to Him from whom it comes. He never leaves off till He has completed, nor can any one say about any of His work, 'He began to build, and was not able to finish.' So, Christian people! I would that we should rise to the height of our prerogatives, and realise the fact that perfect victory is possible, regard being had to the power which 'teaches our hands to war and our fingers to fight.' A great deal of not altogether profitable jangling goes on at present in reference to the question of whether absolute sinlessness is possible for a Christian man on earth. Whatever view we take upon that question, it ought not to hide from us the fact which should loom very much more largely in our daily operative belief than it does with most of us, that in so far as the power which is given to us is concerned, perfect victory is within our grasp, and is the only worthy and correspondent result to the perfect power which worketh in us. So there is no reason, as from any defect of the divine gift to the weakest of us, why our Christian lives should have ups and downs, why there should be interruptions in our devotion, fallings short in our consecration, contradictions in our conduct, slidings backward in our progress. There is no reason why, in our Christian year, there should be summer and winter; but according to the symbolical saying of one of the old prophets, 'The ploughman may overtake the reaper, and he that treadeth out the grapes him that soweth the seed.' In so far as our Christian life is concerned, the perfection of the power

that is granted to us involves the possibility of perfection in the recipient.

And the same thing is true in reference to a Christian man's work in the world. God's Church has ample resources to overcome the evil of the world. The fire is tremendous, but the Christian Church has possession of the floods that can extinguish the fire. If we utilised all that we have, we might 'smite till we had consumed,' and turned the world into the Church of God. That is the ideal, the possibility, when we look at the Christian man as possessor of the communicated power of God. And then we turn to the reality, to our own consciences, to the state of our religious communities everywhere, and we see what seems to be blank contradiction of the possibility. Where is the explanation?

III. That brings me to my last point, the partial victory that is actually won.

'Thou shouldst have smitten five or six times; then hadst thou smitten the Syrians till they were consumed. But now thou shalt conquer but thrice.' All God's promises and prophecies are conditional. There is no such thing as an unconditional promise of victory or of defeat; there is always an 'if.' There is always man's freedom as a factor. It is strange. I suppose no thinking, metaphysical or theological, ever has solved or ever will, that great paradox of the power of a finite will to lift itself up in the face of, and antagonism to, an Infinite Will backed by infinite power, and to thwart its purposes. 'How often *would I* have gathered . . . and ye *would not*.' Here is all the power for a perfect victory, and yet the man that has it has to be contented with a very partial one.

It is a solemn thought that the Church's unbelief can

limit and hinder Christ's work in the world, and we have here another illustration of that truth. You will find now and then in the newspapers, stories—they may be true or false—about caterpillars stopping a train. There is an old legend of that fabulous creature the remora, a tiny thing that fastened itself to the keel of a ship, and arrested it in mid-ocean. That is what we do with God and His purposes, and with His power granted to us.

A low expectation limits the power. This king did not believe, did not expect, that he would conquer utterly, and so he did not. You believe that you can do a thing, and in nine cases out of ten that goes nine-tenths of the way towards doing it. If we cast ourselves into our fight expecting victory, the expectation will realise itself in nine cases out of ten. And the man who in faith refuses to say 'that beast of a word—impossible!' will find that 'all things are possible to him that believeth.' 'Expect great things of God,' and you will feel His power tingling to your very fingertips, and will be able to draw the arrow to its head, and send it whizzing home to its mark.

Small desires block the power. Where there is an iron-bound coast running in one straight line, the whole ocean may dash itself on the cliffs at the base, but it enters not into the land; but where the shore opens itself out into some deep gulf far inland, and broad across at the entrance, then the glad water rushes in and fills it all. Make room for God in your lives by your desires and you will get Him in the fullness of His power.

The use of our power increases our power. Joash had an unused quiver full of arrows, and he only smote thrice. 'To him that hath shall be given, and

from him that hath not shall be taken.' The reason why many of us professing Christians have so little of the strength of God in our lives is because we have made so little use of the strength that we have. Stow away your seed-corn in a granary and do not let the air into it, and weevils and rats will consume it. Sow it broadcast on the fields with liberal hand, and it will spring up, 'some thirty, some sixty, some an hundredfold.' Use increases strength in all regions, and unused organs atrophy and wither.

So, dear friends! if we will keep ourselves in contact with Christ, and tremulously sensitive to His touch, if we will expect power according to our tasks and our needs, if we will desire more of His grace, and if we will honestly and manfully use the strength that we have, then He will 'teach our hands to war and our fingers to fight,' and will give us strength, 'so that a bow of brass is bent by' our arms, and we shall be 'more than conquerors through Him that loved us.'

A KINGDOM'S EPITAPH

'In the ninth year of Hoshea the king of Assyria took Samaria, and carried Israel away into Assyria, and placed them in Halah and in Habor by the river of Goran, and in the cities of the Medes. 7. For so it was, that the children of Israel had sinned against the Lord their God, which had brought them up out of the land of Egypt, from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and had feared other gods, 8. And walked in the statutes of the heathen, whom the Lord cast out from before the children of Israel, and of the kings of Israel, which they had made. 9. And the children of Israel did secretly those things that were not right against the Lord their God, and they built them high places in all their cities, from the tower of the watchmen to the fenced city. 10. And they set them up images and groves in every high hill, and under every green tree: 11. And there they burnt incense in all the high places, as did the heathen whom the Lord carried away before them; and wrought wicked things to provoke the Lord to anger: 12. For they served idols, whereof the Lord had said unto them, Ye shall not do this thing. 13. Yet the Lord testified against Israel, and against Judah, by all the prophets and by all the seers, saying, Turn ye from your evil ways, and keep My commandments and My statutes, according to all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you by My servants the prophets. 14. Notwithstanding they would not hear, but hardened their necks, like to the neck of their fathers, that did not believe in the Lord their God. 15. And they rejected His statutes, and His covenant that He

made with their fathers, and His testimonies which He testified against them; and they followed vanity, and became vain, and went after the heathen that were round about them, concerning whom the Lord had charged them, that they should not do like them. 16. And they left all the commandments of the Lord their God, and made them molten images, even two calves, and made a grove, and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served Baal. 17. And they caused their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire, and used divination and enchantments, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the Lord, to provoke Him to anger. 18. Therefore the Lord was very angry with Israel, and removed them out of His sight: there was none left but the tribe of Judah only.—2 KINGS xvii. 6-18.

THE brevity of the account of the fall of Samaria in verse 6 contrasts with the long enumeration of the sins which caused it, in the rest of this passage. Modern critics assume that verses 7-23 are ‘an interpolation by the Deuteronomic writer,’ apparently for no reason but because they trace Israel’s fall to its cause in idolatry. But surely the bare notice in verse 6, immediately followed by verse 24, cannot have been all that the original historian had to say about so tragic an end of so large a part of the people of God. The whole purpose of the Old Testament history is not to chronicle events, but to declare God’s dealings, and the fall of a kingdom was of little moment, except as revealing the righteousness of God.

The main part of this passage, then, is the exposition of the causes of the national ruin. It is a *post mortem* inquiry into the diseases that killed a kingdom. At first sight, these verses seem a mere heaping together, not without some repetition, of one or two charges; but, more closely looked at, they disclose a very striking progress of thought. In the centre stands verse 13, telling of the mission of the prophets. Before it, verses 7-12, narrate Israel’s sin, which culminates in provoking the Lord to anger (ver. 11). After it, the sins are reiterated with noticeable increase of emphasis, and again culminate in provoking the Lord to anger (ver. 17). So we have two degrees of guilt—one before and one after the prophets’ messages; and two kind-

lings of God's anger—one which led to the sending of the prophets, and one which led to the destruction of Israel. The lessons that flow from this obvious progress of thought are plain.

I. The less culpable apostasy before the prophets' warnings. The first words of verse 7, rendered as in the Revised Version, give the purpose of all that follows; namely, to declare the causes of the calamity just told. Note that the first characteristic of Israel's sin was ungrateful departure from God. There is a world of pathos and meaning in that 'their God,' which is enhanced by the allusion to the Egyptian deliverance. All sins are attempts to break the chain which binds us to God—a chain woven of a thousand linked benefits. All practically deny His possession of us, and ours of Him, and display the short memory which ingratitude has. All have that other feature hinted at here—the contrast, so absurd if it were not so sad, between the worth and power of the God who is left and the other gods who are preferred. The essential meanness and folly of Israel are repeated by every heart departing from the living God.

The double origin of the idolatry is next set forth. It was in part imported and in part home-made. We have little conception of the strength of faith and courage which were needed to keep the Jews from becoming idolaters, surrounded as they were by such. But the same are needed to-day to keep us from learning the ways of the world and getting a snare to our souls. Now, as ever, walking with God means walking in the opposite direction from the crowd, and that requires some firm nerve. The home-made idolatry is gibbeted as being according to 'the statutes of the kings.' What right had they to prescribe their subjects'

religion? The influence of influential people, especially if exerted against the service of God, is hard to resist; but it is no excuse for sin that it is fashionable.

The blindness of Israel to the consequences of their sin is hinted in the reference to the fate of the nations whom they imitated. They had been cast out; would not their copyists learn the lesson? We, too, have examples enough of what godless lives come to, if we had the sense to profit by them. The God who cast out the vile Canaanites and all the rest of the wicked crew before the sons of the desert has not changed, and will treat Israel as He did them, if Israel come down to their level. Outward privileges make idolatry or any sin more sinful, and its punishment more severe.

Another characteristic of Israel's sin is its being done 'secretly.' Of the various meanings proposed for that word (ver. 9) the best seems to be that it refers to the attempt to combine the worship of God and of idols, of which the calf worship is an instance. Elijah had long ago taunted the people with trying 'to hobble on both knees,' or on 'two opinions' at once; and here the charge is of covering idolatry with a cloak of Jehovah worship. A varnish of religion is convenient and cheap, and often effectual in deceiving ourselves as well as others; but 'as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he,' whatever his cloak may be; and the thing which we count most precious and long most for is our god, whatever our professions of orthodox religion.

The idolatry is then described, in rapid touches, as universal. Wherever there was a solitary watchman's tower among the pastures there was a high place, and they were reared in every city. Images and Asherim deformed every hill-top and stood under every spreading tree. Everywhere incense loaded the heavy air

with its foul fragrance. The old scenes of unnamable abomination, which had been so terribly avenged, seemed to have come back, and to cry aloud for another purging by fire and sword.

The terrible upshot of all was 'to provoke the Lord to anger.' The New Testament is as emphatic as the Old in asserting that there is the capacity of anger in the God whose name is love, and that sin calls it forth. The special characteristic of sin, by which it thus attracts that lightning, is that it is disobedience. As in the first sin, so in all others, God has said, 'Ye shall not do this thing'; and we say, 'Do it we will.' What can the end of that be but the anger of the Lord?

Because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience.'

II. Verse 13 gives the pleading of Jehovah. The mission of the prophets was God's reply to Israel's rebellion, and was equally the sign of His anger and of His love. The more sin abounds, the more does God multiply means to draw back to Himself. The deafer the ears, the louder the beseeching voice of His grieved and yet pitying love. His anger clothes itself in more stringent appeals and clearer revelations of Himself before it takes its slaughtering weapons in hand. The darker the background of sin, the brighter the beams of His light show against it. Man's sin is made the occasion for a more glorious display of God's character and heart. It is on the storm-cloud that the sun paints the rainbow. Each successive stage in man's departure from God evoked a corresponding increase in the divine effort to attract him back, till 'last of all He sent unto them His Son.' In nature, attraction diminishes as distance increases; in the realms of grace, it grows with distance. The one desire of God's heart is

that sinners would return from their evil ways, and He presses on them the solemn thought of the abundant intimations of His will which have been given from of old, and are pealed again into all ears by living voices. His law for us is not merely an old story spoken centuries ago, but is vocal in our consciences to-day, and fresh as when Sinai flamed and thundered above the camp, and the trumpet thrilled each heart.

III. The heavier sin that followed the divine pleading. That divine voice leaves no man as it finds him. If it does not sway him to obedience, it deepens his guilt, and makes him more obstinate. Like some perverse ox in the yoke, he stiffens his neck; and stands the very picture of brute obduracy. There is an awful alternative involved in our hearing of God's message, which never returns to Him void, but ever does something to the hearer, either softening or hardening, either scaling the eyes or adding another film on them, either being the 'savour of life unto life or of death unto death.' The mission of the prophets changed forgetfulness of God's 'statutes' into 'rejection' of them, and made idolatry self-conscious rebellion. Alas, that men should make what is meant to be a bond to unite them to God into a wedge to part them farther from Him! But how constantly that is the effect of the gospel, and for the same reason as in Israel—that they 'did not believe in the Lord their God'!

The miserable result on the sinners' own natures is described with pregnant brevity in verse 15. 'They followed vanity, and became vain.' The worshipper became like the thing worshipped, as is always the case. The idol is vanity, utter emptiness and nonentity; and whoever worships nothingness will become in his own inmost life as empty and vain as it is. That is the

retribution attendant on all trust in, and longing after, the trifles of earth, that we come down to the level of what we set our hearts upon. We see the effects of that principle in the moral degradation of idolaters. Gods lustful, cruel, capricious, make men like themselves. We see it working upwards in Christianity, in which God becomes man that men may become like God, and of which the whole law is put into one precept, which is sure to be kept, in the measure of the reality of a man's religion. 'Be ye therefore imitators of God, as beloved children.'

In verses 16 and 17 the details of the idolatry follow the general statement, as in verses 9 to 12, but with additions and with increased severity of tone. We hear now of calves and star worship, and Baal, and burning children to Moloch, and divination and enchantment. The catalogue is enlarged, and there is added to it the terrible declaration that Israel had 'sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the Lord.' The same thing was said by Elijah to Ahab—a noble instance of courage. The sinner who steels himself against the divine remonstrance, does not merely go on in his old sins, but adds new ones. Begin with the calves, and fancy that you are worshipping Jehovah, and you will end with Baal and Moloch. Refuse to hear God's pleadings, and you will sell your freedom, and become the lowest and only real kind of slave—the bondsman of evil. When that point of entire abandonment to sin, which Paul calls being 'sold under sin,' is reached, as it may be reached, at all events by a nation, and corruption has struck too deep to be cast out, once again the anger of the Lord is provoked; but this time it comes in a different guise. The armies of the Assyrians, not the prophets, are its messengers

now. Israel had made itself like the nations whom God had used it to destroy, and now it shall be destroyed as they were.

To be swept out of His sight is the fate of obstinate rejection of His commandments and pleadings. Israel made itself the slave of evil, and was made the captive of Assyria. Self-willed freedom, which does as it likes, and heeds not God, ends in bondage, and is itself bondage. God's anger against sin speaks pleadingly to us all, saying, 'Do not this abominable thing that I hate.' Well for us if we hearken to His voice when

His anger is kindled but a little.' If we do not yield to Him, and cast away our idols, we shall become vain as they. Our evil will be more fatal, and our obstinacy more criminal, because He called, and we refused. 'Who may abide the day of His coming? and who shall stand when He appeareth?' These captives, dragging their weary limbs, with despair in their hearts, across the desert to a land of bondage, were but shadows, in the visible region of things, of the far more doleful and dreary fate that sooner or later must fall on those who would none of God's counsel, and despised all His reproof, but cling to their idol till they and it are destroyed together.

DIVIDED WORSHIP

'These nations feared the Lord, and served their own gods.'—2 KINGS XVII. 33.

THE kingdom of Israel had come to its fated end. Its king and people had been carried away captives in accordance with the cruel policy of the great Eastern despotisms, which had so much to do with weakening them by their very conquests. The land had lain

desolate and uncultivated for many years, savage beasts had increased in the untilled solitudes, even as weeds and nettles grew in the gardens and vineyards of Samaria. At last the king of Assyria resolved to people the country; and for this purpose he sent a mixed multitude from the different nationalities of his empire to the land of Israel. They were men of five nationalities, most of them recently conquered. Israel had been deported to different parts of the Assyrian empire; men from different parts of the empire were deported to the land of Israel. Such cruel uprootings seemed to be wisdom, but were really a policy that kept alive disaffection. It was the same mistake (and bore the same fruits) as Austria pursued in sending Hungarian regiments to keep down Venice, and Venetian-born soldiers to overawe Hungary.

These new settlers brought with them their national peculiarities, and among the rest, their gods. They knew nothing about the Jehovah whom they supposed to be the local deity of Israel; and when they were troubled by the wild beasts which had, of course, rapidly increased in the land, they attributed it to their neglect of His worship, and sent an embassy to the king of Assyria telling that as they 'know not the manners of the God of the land,' He has sent lions among them.

This is an instructive example of the heathen way of thinking. They have their local deities. Each land, each valley, each mountain top, has its own. They are ready to worship them all, for they have no real worship for any. Their reason for worship is to escape from harm, to pay the tribute to which the god has a right on his own territory, lest he should make it the worse for them if they neglect it. 'The mild

tolerance of heathendom' simply means the utter absence of religion and an altogether inadequate notion of deity.

So the settlers have sent to them one of these schismatic priests who had belonged to the extinct sanctuary at Beth-el, and he, apparently, not having any truer notions of God or of worship than they had, nothing loth, teaches them the rites of the Israelite worship, which was not like that of Judah, as is distinctly stated in the context. This worship of Jehovah was, however, blended by them with their own national idolatry. How contemptuously the historian enumerates the hard names of their gods and the rabble rout of them which each nation made! 'The men of Babylon *made Succoth-benoth*' (probably a deity, though the name may mean booths for purposes of prostitution) and the others '*made Nergal and Ashima and Nibhaz and Tartak.*' What names, and what a pantheon! 'They feared the Lord and served their own gods.'

This was the beginning of the Samaritan people, whom we find through the rest of Scripture even down to the Acts of the Apostles, retaining some trace of their heathen origin. Simon Magus bewitched them in his sorceries. They began as heathen, though in lapse of years they came to be pure monotheists, even more rigid than the Jews themselves, and to-day, if you went to Nablûs, you would find the small remnant of their descendants adhering to Moses and the law, guarding their sacred copy of the Pentateuch with unintelligent awe, and eating the Paschal Lamb with wild rites. They have changed the object of their worship, but one fears that it is little more real and deep than in old days, 2500 years ago, when

their forefathers 'feared the Lord and served their own gods.'

Now I venture to take this verse as indicative of a tendency which belongs to a great many more people than the confused mass of settlers that were shot down on the hills of Israel by the king of Assyria. It is really a description of a great deal of what goes by the name of religion amongst us.

I. The Religion of Fear.

These people would never have thought about God if it had not been for the lions. When they did think of Him it was only to tremble before Him. The reason for their trembling was that they did not know the etiquette of His worship; that they thought of Him as having rights over them because they had come into His territory, which He would exact, or punish them for omitting. In a word, their notion of God was that of a jealous, capricious tyrant, whose ways were inscrutable to them, in whose territory they found themselves without their will, and who needed to be propitiated if they would live in peace.

And this is the thought which is most operative in many minds, though it is veiled in more seemly phrases, and which darkens and injures all those on whom it lays hold. Need I spend time in showing you how, point by point, this picture is a picture of many among us? How many of you think of God when you are ill, and forget Him when you are well? How many of you pour out a prayer when you are in trouble, and forget all about Him and it when you are prosperous? How many of you see God in your calamities and not in your joys? Why do people call sudden deaths and the like the 'visitation of God'? How many of us are like Italian sailors who burn candles and shriek out to

the Madonna when the storm catches them, and get drunk in the first wine-shop which they come to when they land! Is not many a man's thought of God, 'I knew Thee that Thou wert an austere Man, and I was afraid'?

The popular religion is largely a religion of fear.

There is a fear which is right and noble. That is reverend, humble adoration at the sight or thought of God's great perfections. Angels veil their faces with their wings. Such awe has no thought of personal consequences—is inseparable from all true knowledge of God; for all greatness of character is perfected by love. Of such fear we are not now speaking.

Terror of God is deep in men's hearts.

Fear is the apprehension of personal evil from some person or thing. Now I believe that terror has its place in the human economy, and in religion, as the sense of pain has. There is something in man's relations to God to cause it.

The Bible sets forth 'the terror of the Lord,' that men may tremble before Him. Moses said, 'I exceedingly fear and quake.' But that terror is only right when it proceeds from a sense of God's holiness and a consciousness of my own sinfulness. It is not right when it is a mere dread of a hard tyrant. That terror is only right when it leads to a joyful acceptance of God's revelation of His love in Christ.

Fear was never meant to be permanent, it is only the alarum-bell which rings to wake up the soul that sleeps on when in mortal peril. And it should pass into penitence, faith, joy in Jesus. 'We have access with confidence by the faith of Him.' The brightness is great and awful, but go nearer, as you can in Jesus, and lo! there is love in the brightness. You see it all

tender and sweet. A heart and a hand are there, and from the midst of it the Father's voice speaks, and says, 'My son, give Me thine heart.'

The religion of fear is worthless. It produces no holiness, it does nothing for a man, it does not bind him to God. He is none the stronger for it. It paralyses so far as it does anything.

It is spasmodic and intermittent. It is impossible to keep it up, so it comes in fits and starts. When the morning comes men laugh at their terrors. It leads to wild endeavours to forget God—atheism—to insensibility. He who begins by fearing when there was no need, ends by not fearing when he ought.

II. The Religion of Form.

The Samaritans' whole worship was outward worship. They did the things which the Beth-el priest taught them to do, and that was all.

And this again is a type, very common in our day. Religion must have forms. The forms often help to bring us the spirit. But we are always in danger of trusting to them too much.

How many of us have our Christianity only in outward seeming? The only thing that unites men to God is love.

So your external connection with God's worship is of no use at all unless you have that.

Church and chapel-goers are alike exposed to the danger of erecting the forms of worship to a place in which they cannot be put without marring the spirit of worship. Whether our worship be more or less symbolic, whether we have a more or less elaborate ritual, whether we think more or less of sacraments, whether we put hearing a sermon as more or less prominent, or even if we follow the formless forms of

the Friends, we are all tempted to substitute our forms for the spirit which alone is worship.

III. The Religion of Compromise or Worldliness.

They had God and they had gods. They liked the latter best. They gave God formal worship, but they gave the others more active service.

Such a kind of religion is a type of much that we see around us; the attempt to be Christians and worldlings, the indecision under which many men labour all their lives, being drawn one way by their consciences, another by their inclinations.

You cannot unite the two. God requires all. He fills the heart, and claims supreme control over all the nature. There cannot be two supreme in the soul. It cannot be God and self. It must be God or self. You may look now one way and now another, but the way the heart goes is the thing. Mr. Facing-both-ways does not really face both ways. He only turns quickly round from one to the other.

Such divided religion is impossible in the nature of God—of the soul—of religion.

To attempt it, then, is really to decide against God.

It is weak and unmanly to be thus vague and decided by circumstances. You would have been a Mohammedan if you had been born in Turkey.

You ought to decide for God.

He claims, He deserves, He will reward and bless, your whole soul.

‘Choose you this day whom ye will serve. If the Lord be God, follow Him.’ If Baal or Succoth-benoth, then follow him. ‘You cannot serve God and Mammon.’ ‘He that is not for us is against us.’ Be one thing or the other.

HEZEKIAH, A PATTERN OF DEVOUT LIFE

'Hezekiah trusted in the Lord God of Israel. . . & He clave to the Lord, and departed not from following Him, but kept His commandments.'—2 KINGS xviii. 5, 6.

DEVOUT people in all ages and stations are very much like each other. The elements of godliness are always the same. This king of Israel, something like two thousand six hundred years ago, and the humblest Christian to-day have the family likeness on their faces. These words, which are an outline sketch of the king's character, are really a sketch of the religious life at all times and in all places. He realised it; why may not we? He achieved it amid much ignorance; why should not we amid our blaze of knowledge? He accomplished it amid the temptations of a monarchy; why should not we in our humbler spheres?

There are four things set forth here as constituting a religious life. We begin at the bottom with the foundation of everything. 'He trusted in the Lord God of Israel.' The Old Testament is just as emphatic in declaring that there is no religion without trust, and that trust is the very nerve and life-blood of religion, as is the New. Only that in the one half of the book our translators have chosen to use the word 'trust,' and in the other half of the book they have chosen to use, for the very same act, the word 'faith.' They have thus somewhat obscured the absolute identity which exists in the teaching of the Old and of the New Testament as regards the bond which unites men to God. That union always was, and always will be, begun in the simple attitude and exercise of trust, and everything else will come out of that, and without that nothing else will

So this king had a certain measure of knowledge about the character of God, and that measure of knowledge led him to lean all his weight upon the Lord. You and I know a great deal more about God and His ways and purposes than Hezekiah did, but we can make no better use of it than he did—translate our knowledge into faith, and rely with simple, absolute confidence on Him whose name we know in Christ more fully and blessedly than was possible to Hezekiah.

And need I remind you of how, in this life of which the outline is here given and the inmost secret is here disclosed, there were significant and magnificent instances of the power of humble trust to bring to an else helpless man all the blessings that he needs, and to put a crystal wall round about him that will preserve him from every evil, howsoever threatening it may seem?

‘It has come addressed to me, but it is meant for Thee. Vindicate Thine own cause by delivering Thine own servant.’ And so, ‘when the morning dawned, they were all dead men,’ and faith rejoiced in a perfect deliverance. And you and I may get the same answer, in the midst of all our trials, difficulties, toils, and conflicts, if only we will go the same way to get it, and let our faith work, as Hezekiah’s worked, and take everything that troubles us to our Father in the heavens, and be quite sure that He is the God ‘who daily bears our burdens.’ Let us begin with the simple act of confidence in Him. That is the foundation, and on that we may build everything besides.

Let us see what this man further built upon it. The second story, if I may so say, of the temple-fortress of his life, upon the foundation of faith, was, ‘He clave to the Lord.’

That is to say, the act of confidence must be followed and perfected by tenacious adherence with all the tendrils of a man's nature to the God in whom he says that he trusts. The metaphor is a very forcible one, so familiar in Scripture as that we are apt to overlook its emphasis. Let me recall one or two of the instances in which it is employed about other matters which throw light on its force here.

First of all, remember that sweet picture of the widow woman from Moab, and the two daughters-in-law, one sent back, not reluctantly, to her home; and the other persisting in keeping by Naomi's side, in spite of difficulties and remonstrances. With kisses of real love Orpah went back, but she did go back, to her people and her gods, but 'Ruth clave unto her.' So should we cling to God, as Ruth flung her arms round Naomi, and twined her else lonely and desolate heart about her dear and only friend, for whose sweet sake she became a willing exile from kindred and country. Is that how we cleave to the Lord?

More sacred still are the lessons that are suggested by the fact that this is the word employed to describe the blessed and holy union of man and woman in pure wedded life, and I suppose some allusion to that use of the expression underlies its constant application to the relation of the believing soul to Jehovah. For by trust the soul is wedded to Him, and so 'joined to the Lord' as to be 'one spirit.'

Or if we do not care to go so deep as that, let us take the metaphor that lies in the word itself, without reference to its Scriptural applications. As the limpet holds on to its rock, as the ivy clings to the wall, as a shipwrecked sailor grasps the spar which keeps his head above water, so a Christian man ought to hold on

to God, with all his energy, and with all parts of his nature. The metaphor implies tenacity; closeness of adhesion, in heart and will, in thought, in desire, and in all the parts of our receptive humanity, all of which can touch God and be touched by Him, and all of which are blessed only in the measure in which, yielding to Him, they are filled and steadied and glorified.

And there is implied, too, not only tenacity of adherence, but tenacity in the face of obstacles. There must be resistance to all the forces which would detach, if there is to be union with God in the midst of life in the world. Or, to recur for a moment to the figure that I employed a moment ago, as the sailor clings to a spar, though the waves dash round him, and his fingers get stiffened with cold and cramped with keeping the one position, and can scarcely hold on, but he knows that it is life to cling and death to loosen, and so tightens his grasp; thus have we to lay hold of God, and in spite of all obstacles, to keep hold of Him. Our grasp tends to slacken, and is feeble at the best, even if there were nothing outside of us to make it difficult for us to get a good grip. But there are howling winds and battering waves blowing and beating on us, and making it hard to keep our hold.

Do not let us yield to these, but in spite of them all let our hearts tighten round Him, for it is only in His sweet, eternal, perfect love that they can be at rest. And let our thoughts keep close to Him in spite of all distractions, for it is only in the measure in which His light fills our minds and His truth occupies our thoughts that our thinking spirits will be at rest. And let our desires, as the tentacles of some shell-fish fasten upon the rock, and feel out towards the ocean that is coming to it, let our desires go all out towards Him

until they touch that after which they feel, and curl round it in repose and in blessedness.

The whole secret of a joyful, strong, noble Christian life lies here—that on the foundation of faith we should rear tenacious adherence to Him in spite of all obstacles. So it was a most encyclopædic, though laconic, exhortation that that ‘good man’ sent down from Jerusalem to encourage the first heathen converts gave, when instead of all other instruction or advice, or inculcation of less important, and yet real, Christian duties, Barnabas exhorted them all ‘that with purpose of heart’—the full devotion of their inmost natures—‘they should cleave to the Lord.’

Then the third stage, or the third story, in this building is that, cleaving to the Lord, ‘he departed not from following Him.’ The metaphor of cleaving implies proximity and union; the metaphor of following implies distance which is being diminished. These two are incongruous, and the very incongruity helps to give point to the representation. The same two ideas of union and yet of pursuit are brought still more closely together in other parts of Scripture. For instance, there is a remarkable saying in one of the Psalms, translated in our Bible—‘My soul followeth hard after Thee. Thy right hand upholdeth me,’ where the expression ‘followeth hard after’ is a lame attempt at translating the perhaps impossible-to-be-translated fullness of the original, which reads ‘My soul cleaveth after Thee.’ It is an incongruous combination of ideas, by its very incongruity and paradoxical form suggesting a profound truth—viz. that in all the conscious union and tenacious adherence to God which makes the Christian life, there is ever, also, a sense of distance

which kindles aspiration and leads to the effort after continual progress. However close we may be to God, it is always possible to press closer. However full may be the union, it may always be made fuller; and the cleaving spirit will always be longing for a closer contact and a more blessed sense of being in touch with God.

So, as we climb, new heights reveal themselves, and the further we advance in the Christian life the more are we conscious of the infinite depths that yet remain to be traversed. Hence arises one great element of the blessedness of being a Christian—namely, that we need not fear ever coming to the end of the growth in holiness and the increase of joy and power that are possible to us. So that weariness, and the sense of having reached the limits that are possible on a given path, which sooner or later fall upon men that live for anything but God, can never be ours if we live for Him. But the oldest and most experienced will have the same forward-looking glances of hope and forward-directed steps of strenuous effort as the youngest beginner on the path; and a Paul will be able to say when he is ‘Paul the aged,’ and ‘the time of his departure is at hand,’ that he ‘forgets the things that are behind, and reaches forth unto the things that are before, while he presses towards the mark.’ Let us be thankful for the endless progress which is possible to the Christian, and let us see to it that we are never paralysed into supposing that ‘to-morrow must be as this day,’ but trust the infinite resources of our God, and be sure that we growingly make our own the growing gifts which He bestows.

And so, lastly, the fourth element in this analysis of a devout life is ‘He kept the commandments of the

Lord.' That is the outcome of them all. Faith, adhesion, aspiration, and progress, all vindicate their value and reality in the simple, homely way of practical obedience.

Let us learn two things. One as to the worthlessness of all these others, if they do not issue in this. Not that these inward emotions are ever to be despised, but that, if they are genuine in our hearts, they cannot but manifest themselves in our lives. And so, dear Christian friends! do you not build upon your faith, on your adherence to God, on your aspirations after Him, unless you can bring into court, as witnesses for these, daily and hourly, your efforts after the conformity of your will to His, in the great things and in the small. Then, and only then, may we be sure that our confidence is not a delusion, and that it is to Him that we cleave when our feet tread in the paths of goodness.

And on the other hand, let us learn that all attempts to be obedient to a divine will which do not begin with trust and cleaving to Him are vain. There is no other way to get that conformity of will except by that union of spirit. All other attempts are beginning at the wrong end. You do not begin building your houses with the chimney-pots, but many a man who seeks to obey without trusting does precisely commit that fault. Let us be sure that the foundations are in, and then let us be sure that we do not stop half-way up, lest all that pass by should mock and say, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.'

How many professing Christians' lives are half-finished and unroofed houses, because they have not 'added to their faith'—that is, to their 'cleaving to the Lord'—endless aspiration and continual progress, and

to their aspiration and their progress the peaceable fruit of practical righteousness! If these things be in us and abound, they mark us as devout men after God's pattern. And if we want to be devout men after God's pattern, we must follow God's sequence, which begins with trust and ends with obedience.

'HE UTTERED HIS VOICE, THE EARTH MELTED'

'Then Isaiah the son of Amoz sent to Hezekiah, saying, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, That which thou hast prayed to Me against Sennacherib king of Assyria I have heard. 21. This is the word that the Lord hath spoken concerning him; The virgin, the daughter of Zion, hath despised thee, and laughed thee to scorn; the daughter of Jerusalem hath shaken her head at thee. 22. Whom hast thou reproached and blasphemed? and against whom hast thou exalted thy voice, and lifted up thine eyes on high? even against the Holy One of Israel. . . . 23. Because thy rage against Me and thy tumult is come up into Mine ears, therefore I will put My hook in thy nose, and My bridle in thy lips, and I will turn thee back by the way by which thou camest. 29. And this shall be a sign unto thee, Ye shall eat this year such things as grow of themselves, and in the second year that which springeth of the same; and in the third year sow ye, and reap, and plant vineyards, and eat the fruits thereof. 30. And the remnant that is escaped of the house of Judah shall yet again take root downward, and bear fruit upward. 31. For out of Jerusalem shall go forth a remnant, and they that escape out of mount Zion: the zeal of the Lord of hosts shall do this. 32. Therefore thus saith the Lord concerning the king of Assyria, He shall not come into this city, nor shoot an arrow there, nor come before it with shield, nor cast a bank against it. 33. By the way that he came, by the same shall he return, and shall not come into this city, saith the Lord. 34. For I will defend this city, to save it, for Mine own sake, and for My servant David's sake. 35. And it came to pass that night, that the angel of the Lord went out, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians an hundred fourscore and five thousand; and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses. 36. So Sennacherib king of Assyria departed, and went and returned, and dwelt at Nineveh. 37. And it came to pass, as he was worshipping in the house of Nisroch his god, that Adrammelech and Sharezer his sons smote him with the sword; and they escaped into the land of Armenia: and Esarhaddon his son reigned in his stead.'—2 KINGS XIX. 20-22; 23-37.

At an earlier stage of the Assyrian invasion Hezekiah had sent to Isaiah, asking him to pray to his God for deliverance, and had received an explicit assurance that the invasion would be foiled. When the second stage was reached, and Hezekiah was personally summoned to surrender, by a letter which scoffed at Isaiah's pro-

mise, he himself prayed before the Lord. Isaiah does not seem to have been present, and may not have known of the prayer. At all events, the answer was given to him to give to the king; and it is noteworthy that, as in the former case, he does not himself come, but sends to Hezekiah. He did come when he had to bring a message of death, and again when he had to rebuke (chap. xx.), but now he only sends. As the chosen speaker of Jehovah's will, he was mightier than kings, and must not imperil the dignity of the message by the behaviour of the messenger. In a sentence, Hezekiah's prayer is answered, and then the prophet, in Jehovah's name, bursts into a wonderful song of triumph over the defeated invader. 'I have heard.' That is enough. Hezekiah's prayer has, as it were, fired the fuse or pulled the trigger, and the explosion follows, and the shot is sped. 'Whereas thou hast prayed, . . . I have heard,' is ever true, and God's hearing is God's acting in answer. The methods of His response vary, the fact that He responds to the cry of despair driven to faith by extremity of need does not vary.

But it is noteworthy that, with that brief, sufficient assurance, Hezekiah, as it were, is put aside, and instead of three fighters in the field, the king, with God to back him, and on the other side Sennacherib, two only, appear. It is a duel between Jehovah and the arrogant heathen who had despised Him. Jerusalem appears for a moment, in a magnificent piece of poetical scorn, as despising and making gestures of contempt at the baffled would-be conqueror, as Miriam and her maidens did by the Red Sea. The city is 'virgin,' as many a fortress in other lands has been named, because uncaptured. But she, too, passes out of sight, and Jehovah and Sennacherib stand opposed on the

field. God speaks now not 'concerning,' but to, him, and indicts him for insane pride, which was really a denial of dependence on God, and passionate antagonism to Him, as manifested not only in his war against Jehovah's people, but also in the tone of his insolent defiances of Hezekiah, in which he scoffed at the vain trust which the latter was placing in his God, and paralleled Jehovah with the gods of the nations whom he had already conquered (Isaiah xix. 12).

The designation of God, characteristic of Isaiah, as 'the Holy One of Israel,' expresses at once His elevation above, and separation from, all mundane, creatural limitations, and His special relation to His people, and both thoughts intensify Sennacherib's sin. The Highest, before whose transcendent height all human elevations sink to a uniform level, has so joined Israel to Himself that to touch it is to strike at Him, and to vaunt one's self against it is to be arrogant towards God. That mighty name has received wider extension now, but the wider sweep does not bring diminished depth, and lowly souls who take that name for their strong tower can still run into it and be safe from 'the oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,' and the strongest foes.

There is tremendous scorn in the threat with which the divine address to Sennacherib ends. The dreaded world-conqueror is no more in God's eyes than a wild beast, which He can ring and lead as He will, and not even as formidable as that, but like a horse or a mule, that can easily be bridled and directed. What majestic assertion lies in these figures and in '*My* hook' and '*My* bridle!' How many conquerors and mighty men since then have been so mastered, and their schemes balked! Sennacherib had to return by 'the way that he came,'

and to tramp back, foiled and disappointed, over all the weary miles which he had trodden before with such insolent confidence of victory. A modern parallel is Napoleon's retreat from Moscow. But the same experience really befalls all who order life regardless of God. Their schemes may seem to succeed, but in deepest truth they fail, and the schemers never reach their goal.

In verse 29 the prophet turns away abruptly and almost contemptuously from Sennacherib to speak comfortably to Jerusalem, addressing Hezekiah first, but turning immediately to the people. The substance of his words to them is, first, the assurance that the Assyrian invasion had limits of time set to it by God; and, second, that beyond it lay prosperous times, when the prophetic visions of a flourishing Israel should be realised in fact. For two seed-times only field work was to be impossible on account of the Assyrian occupation, but it was to foam itself away, like a winter torrent, before a third season for sowing came round.

But how could this sequence of events, which required time for its unfolding, be 'a sign'? We must somewhat modify our notions of a sign to understand the prophet. The Scripture usage does not only designate by that name a present event or thing which guarantees the truth of a prophecy, but it sometimes means an event, or sequence of events, in the future, which, when they have come to pass in accordance with the divine prediction of them, will shed back light on other divine words or acts, and demonstrate that they were of God. Thus Moses was given as a sign of his mission the worshipping in Mount Sinai, which was to take place only after the Exodus. So with Isaiah's sign here. When the harvest of the third year was gathered in, then

Israel would know that the prophet had spoken from God when he had sung Sennacherib's defeat. For the present, Hezekiah and Judah had to live by faith; but when the deliverance was complete, and they were enjoying the fruits of their labours and of God's salvation, then they could look back on the weary years, and recognise more clearly than while these were slowly passing how God had been in all the trouble, and had been carrying on His purposes of mercy through it all. And there will be a 'sign' for us in like manner when we look back from eternity on the transitory conflicts of earthly life, and are satisfied with the harvest which He has caused to spring from our poor sowings to the Spirit.

The definite promise of deliverance in verses 32-34 is addressed to Judah, and emphasises the completeness of the frustration of the invader's efforts. There is a climax in the enumeration of the things that he will not be allowed to do—he will not make his entry into the city, nor even shoot an arrow there, nor even make preparation for a siege. His whole design will be overturned, and as had already been said (ver. 28), he will retrace his steps a baffled man.

Note the strong antithesis: 'He shall not come into this city, . . . for I will defend this city.' Zion is impregnable because Jehovah defends it. Sennacherib can do nothing, for he is fighting against God. And if we 'are come unto the city of the living God,' we can take the same promise for the strength of our lives. God saves Zion 'for His own sake,' for His name is concerned in its security, both because He has taken it for His own and because He has pledged His word to guard it. It would be a blot on His faithfulness, a slur on His power, if it should be conquered while it remains true

to Him, its King. His honour is involved in protecting us if we enter into the strong city of which the builder and maker is God. And 'for David's sake,' too, He defends Zion, because He had sworn to David to dwell there. But Zion's security becomes an illusion if Zion breaks away from God. If it becomes as Sodom, it shares Sodom's fate.

It is remarkable that neither in the song of triumph nor in the prophecy of deliverance is there allusion to the destruction of the Assyrian army. How the exultant taunts of the one and the definite promises of the other were to be fulfilled was not declared till the event declared it. But faithful expectation had not long to wait, for 'that night' the blow fell, and no second was needed. We are not told where the Assyrian army was, but clearly it was not before Jerusalem. Nor do we learn what was the instrument of destruction wielded by the 'angel of the Lord,' if there was any. The catastrophe may have been brought about by a pestilence, but however effected, it was 'the act of God,' the fulfilment of His promise, the making bare of His arm. 'By terrible things in righteousness' did He answer the prayer of Hezekiah, and give to all humble souls who are oppressed and cry to Him a pledge that 'as they have heard, so' will they 'see, in the city of' their 'God.' How much more impressive is the stern, naked brevity of the Scriptural account than a more emotional expansion of it, like, for instance, Byron's well-known, and in their way powerful lines, would have been! To the writer of this book it seemed the most natural thing in the world that the foes of Zion should be annihilated by one blow of the divine hand. His business is to tell the facts; he leaves commentary and wonder and triumph or terror to others.

There is but one touch of patriotic exultation apparent in the half-sarcastic and half-rejoicing accumulation of synonyms descriptive of Sennacherib's retreat. He 'departed, and went and returned.' It is like the picture in Psalm xlviii., which probably refers to the same events: 'They saw it, and so they marvelled; they were troubled, and hasted away.'

About twenty years elapsed between Sennacherib's retreat and his assassination. During all that time he 'dwelt at Nineveh,' so far as Judah was concerned. He had had enough of attacking it and its God. But the notice of his death is introduced here, not only to complete the narrative, but to point a lesson, which is suggested by the fact that he was murdered 'as he was worshipping in the house of Nisroch his god.' Hezekiah had gone into the house of *his* God with Sennacherib's letter, and the dead corpses of an army showed what Jehovah could do for His servant; Sennacherib was praying in the temple of *his* god, and his corpse lay stretched before his idol, an object lesson of the impotence of Nisroch and all his like to hear or help their worshippers.

THE REDISCOVERED LAW AND ITS EFFECTS

And Hilkiah the high priest said unto Shaphan the scribe, I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord: and Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan, and he read it. 9. And Shaphan the scribe came to the king, and brought the king word again, and said, Thy servants have gathered the money that was found in the house, and have delivered it into the hand of them that do the work, that have the oversight of the house of the Lord. 10. And Shaphan the scribe shewed the king, saying, Hilkiah the priest hath delivered me a book: and Shaphan read it before the king. 11. And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the book of the law, that he rent his clothes. 12. And the king commanded Hilkiah the priest, and Ahikam the son of Shaphan, and Achbor the son of Michaiah, and Shaphan the scribe, and Asaiah a servant of the king's, saying, 13. Go ye, enquire of the Lord for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that is found: for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not hearkened unto the words of this

book, to do according unto all that which is written concerning us. 14. So Hilkiah the priest, and Ahikam, and Achbor, and Shaphan, and Asahiah, went unto Huldah the prophetess, the wife of Shallum the son of Tikvah, the son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe; (now she dwelt in Jerusalem in the college;) and they communed with her. 15. And she said unto them, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Tell the man that sent you to me, 16. Thus saith the Lord, Behold, I will bring evil upon this place, and upon the inhabitants thereof, even all the words of the book which the king of Judah hath read: 17. Because they have forsaken Me, and have burnt incense unto other gods, that they might provoke Me to anger with all the works of their hands; therefore My wrath shall be kindled against this place, and shall not be quenched. 18. But to the king of Judah, which sent you to enquire of the Lord, thus shall ye say to him, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, As touching the words which thou hast heard; 19. Because thine heart was tender, and thou hast humbled thyself before the Lord, when thou heardest what I speak against this place, and against the inhabitants thereof, that they should become a desolation and a curse, and hast rent thy clothes, and wept before Me; I also have heard thee, saith the Lord. 20. Behold, therefore, I will gather thee unto thy fathers, and thou shalt be gathered into thy grave in peace; and thine eyes shall not see all the evil which I will bring upon this place. And they brought the king word again.'—2 KINGS xxii. 8-20.

WE get but a glimpse into a wild time of revolution and counter-revolution in the brief notice that the 'servants of Amon,' Josiah's father, conspired and murdered him in his palace, but were themselves killed by a popular rising, in which the 'people of the land made Josiah his son king in his stead,' and so no doubt balked the conspirators' plans. Poor boy! he was only eight years old when he made his first acquaintance with rebellion and bloodshed. There must have been some wise heads and strong arms and loyal hearts round him, but their names have perished. The name of David was still a spell in Judah, and guarded his childish descendant's royal rights. In the eighteenth year of his reign, the twenty-sixth of his age, he felt himself firm enough in the saddle to begin a work of religious reformation, and the first reward of his zeal was the finding of the book of the law. Josiah, like the rest of us, gained fuller knowledge of God's will in the act of trying to do it so far as he knew it. 'Light is sown for the upright.'

I. We have, first, the discovery of the law. The important and complicated critical questions raised by

the narrative cannot be discussed here, nor do they affect the broad lines of teaching in the incident. Nothing is more truthful-like than the statement that, in course of the repairs of the Temple, the book should be found,—probably in the holiest place, to which the high priest would have exclusive access. How it came to have been lost is a more puzzling question; but if we recall that seventy-five years had passed since Hezekiah, and that these were almost entirely years of apostasy and of tumult, we shall not wonder that it was so. Unvalued things easily slip out of sight, and if the preservation of Scripture depended on the estimation which some of us have of it, it would have been lost long ago. But the fact of the loss suggests the wonder of the preservation. It would appear that this copy was the only one existing,—at all events, the only one known. It alone transmitted the law to later days, like some slender thread of water that finds its way through the sand and brings the river down to broad plains beyond. Think of the millions of copies now, and the one dusty, forgotten roll tossing unregarded in the dilapidated Temple, and be thankful for the Providence that has watched over the transmission. Let us take care, too, that the whole Scripture is not as much lost to us, though we have half a dozen Bibles each, as the roll was to Josiah and his men.

Hilkiah's announcement to Shaphan has a ring of wonder and of awe in it. It sounds as if he had not known that such a book was anywhere in the Temple. And it is noteworthy that not he, but Shaphan, is said to have read it. Perhaps he could not,—though, if he did not, how did he know what the book was? At all events, he and Shaphan seem to have felt the importance of the find, and to have consulted what was

to be done. Observe how the latter goes cautiously to work, and at first only says that he has received 'a book.' He gives it no name, but leaves it to tell its own story,—which it was then, and is still, well able to do. Scripture is its own best credentials and witnesses whence it comes. Again Shaphan is the reader, as it was natural that a 'scribe' should be, and again the possibility is that Josiah could not read.

II. One can easily picture the scene while the reader's voice went steadily through the commandments, threatenings, and promises,—the deepening eagerness of the king, the gradual shaping out before his conscience of God's ideal for him and his people, and the gradual waking of the sense of sin in him, like a dormant serpent beginning to stir in the first spring sunshine.

The effect of God's law on the sinful heart is vividly pictured in Josiah's emotion. 'By the law is the knowledge of sin.' To many of us that law, in spite of our outward knowledge of it, is as completely absent from our consciousness as it had been from the most ignorant of Josiah's subjects; and if for once its searchlight were thrown into the hidden corners of our hearts and lives, it would show up in dreadful clearness the skulking foes that are stealing to assail us, and the foul things that have made good their lodgment in our hearts and lives. It always makes an epoch in a life when it is really brought to the standard of God's law; and it is well for us if, like Josiah, we rend our clothes, or rather 'our heart, and not our garments,' and take home the conviction, 'I have sinned against the Lord.'

The dread of punishment sprang up in the young king's heart, and though that emotion is not the highest motive for seeking the Lord, it is not an

unworthy one, and is meant to lead on to nobler ones than itself. There is too much unwillingness, in many modern conceptions of Christ's gospel, to recognise the place which the apprehension of personal evil consequences from sin has in the initial stages of the process by which we are 'translated from the kingdom of darkness into that of God's dear Son.'

III. The message to Huldah is remarkable. The persons sent with it show its importance. The high priest, the royal secretary, and one of the king's personal attendants, who was, no doubt, in his confidence, and two other influential men, one of whom, Ahikam, is known as Jeremiah's staunch friend, would make some stir in 'the second quarter,' on their way to the modest house of the keeper of the wardrobe. The weight and number of the deputation did honour to the prophetess, as well as showed the king's anxiety as to the matter in hand. Jeremiah and Zephaniah were both living at this time, and we do not know why Huldah was preferred. Perhaps she was more accessible. But conjecture is idle. Enough that she was recognised as having, and declared herself to have, direct authoritative communications from God.

For what did Josiah need to inquire of the Lord 'concerning the words of this book'? They were plain enough. Did he hope to have their sternness somewhat mollified by the words of a prophetess who might be more amenable to entreaties or personal considerations than the unalterable page was? Evidently he recognised Huldah as speaking with divine authority, and he might have known that two depositories of God's voice could not contradict each other. But possibly his embassy simply reflected his extreme perturbation and alarm, and like many another man

when God's law startles him into consciousness of sin, he betook himself to one who was supposed to be in God's counsels, half hoping for a mitigated sentence, and half uncertain of what he really wished. He confusedly groped for some support or guide. But, confused as he was, his message to the prophetess implied repentance, eager desire to know what to do, and humble docility. If dread of evil consequences leads us to such a temper, we shall hear, as Josiah did, answers of peace as authoritative and divine as were the threatenings that brought us to our senses and our knees.

IV. The answer which Josiah received falls into two parts, the former of which confirms the threatenings of evil to Jerusalem, while the latter casts a gleam athwart the thundercloud, and promises Josiah escape from the national calamities. Observe the difference in the designation given him in the two parts. When the threatenings are confirmed, his individuality is, as it were, sunk; for that part of the message applies to any and every member of the nation, and therefore he is simply called 'the man that sent you.' Any other man would have received the same answer. But when his own fate is to be disclosed, then he is 'the king of Judah, who sent you,' and is described by the official position which set him apart from his subjects.

Huldah has but to confirm the dread predictions of evil which the roll had contained. What else can a faithful messenger of God do than reiterate its threatenings? Vainly do men seek to induce the living prophet to soften down God's own warnings. Foolishly do they think that the messenger or the messenger's Sender has any 'pleasure in the death of the wicked'; and as foolishly do they take the message

to be unkind, for surely to warn that destruction waits the evildoer is gracious. The signal-man who waves the red flag to stop the train rushing to ruin is a friend. Huldah was serving Judah best by plain reiteration of the 'words of the book.'

But the second half of her message told that in wrath God remembered mercy. And that is for ever true. His thunderbolts do not strike indiscriminately, even when they smite a nation. Judah's corruption had gone too far for recovery, and the carcass called for the gathering together of the vultures, but Josiah's penitence was not in vain. 'I have heard thee' is always said to the true penitent, and even if he is involved in widespread retribution, its strokes become different to him. Josiah was assured that the evil should not come in his days. But Huldah's promise seems contradicted by the circumstances of his death. It was a strange kind of being gathered to his grave in peace when he fell on the fatal field of Megiddo, and 'his servants carried him in a chariot dead, . . . and buried him in his own sepulchre' (2 Kings xxiii. 30). But the promise is fulfilled in its real meaning by the fact that the threatenings which he was inquiring about did not fall on Judah in his time, and so far as these were concerned, he *did* come to his grave in peace.

THE END

'And it came to pass in the ninth year of his reign, in the tenth month, in the tenth day of the month, that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came, he, and all his host, against Jerusalem, and pitched against it; and they built forts against it round about. 2. And the city was besieged unto the eleventh year of king Zedekiah. 3. And on the ninth day of the fourth month the famine prevailed in the city, and there was no bread for the people of the land. 4. And the city was broken up, and all the men of war fled by night by the way of the gate, between two walls, which is by the king's garden; (now the Chaldees were against the city round about;) and the king went the way toward the plain. 5. And the army of the Chaldees pursued after the king, and overtook him in the plains of Jericho: and

all his army were scattered from him. 6. So they took the king, and brought him up to the king of Babylon to Riblah; and they gave judgment upon him. 7. And they slew the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, and put out the eyes of Zedekiah, and bound him with fetters of brass, and carried him to Babylon. 8. And in the fifth month, on the seventh day of the month, which is the nineteenth year of king Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, came Nebuzar-adan, captain of the guard, a servant of the king of Babylon, unto Jerusalem: 9. And he burnt the house of the Lord, and the king's house, and all the houses of Jerusalem, and every great man's house burnt he with fire. 10. And all the army of the Chaldees, that were with the captain of the guard, brake down the walls of Jerusalem round about. 11. Now the rest of the people that were left in the city, and the fugitives that fell away to the king of Babylon, with the remnant of the multitude, did Nebuzar-adan, the captain of the guard, carry away. 12. But the captain of the guard left of the poor of the land to be vine-dressers and husbandmen.'—2 KINGS XXV. 1-12.

EIGHTEEN months of long-drawn-out misery and daily increasing famine preceded the fall of the doomed city. The siege was a blockade. No assaults by the enemy, nor sorties by the inhabitants, are narrated, but the former grimly and watchfully drew their net closer, and the latter sat still in their despair. The passionless tone of the narrative here is very remarkable. Not a word escapes the writer to show his feelings, though he is telling his country's fall. We must turn to Lamentations for sighs and groans. There we have the emotions of devout hearts; here we have the calm record of God's judgment. It is all one long sentence, for in the Hebrew each verse begins with 'and,' clause heaped on clause, as if each were a footstep of the destroying angel in his slow, irresistible march.

The narrative falls into two principal parts—the fate of the king and that of the city. It is unnecessary to dwell on the details. The confusion of counsels, the party strife, the fierce hatred of God's prophet, the agony of famine, are all suppressed here, but painted with terrible vividness in the Book of Jeremiah. At last the fatal day came. On the north side a breach was made in the wall, and through it the fierce besiegers poured—the 'princes of the king of Babylon,' with their idolatrous and barbarous names, 'came in,

and sat in the middle gate.' It was night. The sudden appearance of the conquerors in the heart of the city shot panic into the feeble king and his 'men of war' who had never struck one blow for deliverance; and they hurried under cover of darkness, and hidden between two walls, down the ravine to the king's garden, once the scene of pleasure, but waste now, and thence, as best they could, round or over Olivet to the road to Jericho. The king's flight by night had been foretold by Ezekiel far away in captivity (Ezek. xii. 12); and the same prophet received on that very day a divine message announcing the fall of the city, and bidding him 'write thee the name of the day, even of this selfsame day,' as that on which the king of Babylon 'drew close unto Jerusalem' (Ezek. xxiv. 1 *et seq.*).

Down the rocky road went the flying host, with 'their shaftless, broken bows,' closely followed by the avenging foe with 'red pursuing spear.' Where Israel had first set foot on its inheritance, the last king of David's line was captured and his monarchy shattered. The scene of the first victory, when Jericho fell before unarmed men trusting in God, was the scene of the last defeat. The spot where the covenant was renewed, and the reproach of Israel rolled away, was the spot where the broken covenant was finally avenged and abrogated. The end came back to the beginning, and the cradle was the coffin.

Away up to Riblah, in the far north, under the shadow of Lebanon, the captive was dragged to meet the conqueror. The name of each is a profession of belief. The one means 'Jehovah is righteousness'; the other, 'Nebo, protect the crown.' The idol seemed to have overcome, but the defeat of the unbelieving confessor of the true God at the hands of the idolater is really

the victory of the righteousness which the name celebrated and the bearer of the name insulted. His murdered sons were the last sight which he saw before he was blinded, according to the ferocious practice of the East. It was ingenuity of cruelty to let him see for so long, and then to give him that as the last thing seen, and therefore often remembered. Note how the enigma of Ezekiel's prophecy (Ezek. xii. 13) and its apparent contradiction of Jeremiah's (Jer. xxxii. 4; xxxiv. 3) are reconciled, and learn how easily the fact, when it comes, clears the riddles of prophecy, and how easily, probably, the whole facts, if we knew them, would clear the difficulties of Scripture history. The blinded king was harmless, but according to Jewish tradition, was set to work in a mill (though that is probably only an application of Samson's story), and according to Jeremiah (Jer. lii. 11), was kept in prison till his death. So ended the monarchy of Judah.

The fate of the city was not settled for a month, during which, no doubt, there was much consultation at Riblah whether to garrison or destroy it. The king of Babylon did not go in person, but despatched a force commanded by a high officer, to burn palace, Temple, the more important houses (the poorer people would probably be lodged in huts not worth burning), and to raze the fortifications. In accordance with the practice of the great Eastern despotisms, deportation followed victory—a clever though cruel device for securing conquests. But some were left behind; for the land, if deserted, would have fallen out of cultivation, and been profitless to Babylon. The bulk of the people of Jerusalem, the fugitives who had joined the invaders during the siege, and the mass of the general population, were carried off, in such a long string of

misery as we may still see on the monuments, and a handful left behind, too poor to plot, and stirred to diligence by necessity. So ended the possession by Israel of its promised inheritance.

Now this fall of Jerusalem is like an object-lesson to teach everlasting truth as to the retributive providence of God. What does it say?

It declares plainly what brings down God's judgments. The terms on which Israel prospered and held its land were obedience to God's law. We cannot directly apply the principles of God's government of it to modern nations. The present analogue of Israel is the Church, not the nation. But when all deductions have been made, it is still true that a nation's religious attitude is a most potent factor in its prosperous development. It is not accidental that, on the whole, stagnant Europe and America are Roman Catholic, and the progressive parts Protestant. Nor was it causes independent of religion that scattered a decaying Christianity in the lands of the Eastern Church before the onslaught of wild Arabs, who, at all events, did believe in Allah. So there are abundant lessons for politics and sociology in the story of Jerusalem's fall.

But these lessons have direct application to the individual and to the Christian Church. All departure from God is ruin. We slay ourselves by forsaking Him, and every sinner is a suicide. We live under a moral government, and in a system of things so knit together as that even here every transgression receives its just recompense—if not visibly and palpably in outward circumstances, yet really and punctually in effects on mind and heart, which are more solemn and awful. 'Behold the righteous shall be recompensed in the

earth: much more the wicked and the sinner.' Sin and sorrow are root and fruit.

Especially does that crash of Jerusalem's fall thunder the lesson to all churches that their life and prosperity are inseparably connected with faithful obedience and turning away from all worldliness, which is idolatry. They stand in the place that was made empty by Israel's later fall. Our very privileges call us to beware. 'Because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith.' That great seven-branched candlestick was removed out of its place, and all that is left of it is its sculptured image among the spoils on the triumphal arch to its captor. Other lesser candlesticks have been removed from their places, and Turkish oppression brings night where Sardis and Laodicea once gave a feeble light. The warning is needed to-day; for worldliness is rampant in the Church. 'If God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest He also spare not thee.' The fall of Jerusalem is not merely a tragic story from the past. It is a revelation, for the present, of the everlasting truth, that the professing people of God deserve and receive the sorest chastisement, if they turn again to folly.

Further, we learn the method of present retribution. Nebuchadnezzar knew nothing of the purposes which he fulfilled. 'He meaneth not so, neither doth his heart think so.' He was but the 'axe' with which God hewed. Therefore, though he was God's tool, he was also responsible, and would be punished even for performing God's 'whole work upon Jerusalem,' because of 'the glory of his high looks.' The retribution of disobedience, so far as that retribution is outward, needs no 'miracle.' The ordinary

operations of Providence amply suffice to bring it. If God wills to sting, He will 'hiss for the fly,' and it will come. The ferocity and ambition of a grim and bloody despot, impelled by vainglory and lust of cruel conquest, do God's work, and yet the doing is sin. The world is full of God's instruments, and He sends punishments by the ordinary play of motives and circumstances, which we best understand when we see behind all His mighty hand and sovereign will. The short-sighted view of history says 'Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem B.C. so and so,' and then discourses about the tendencies of which Babylonia was exponent and creature. The deeper view says, God smote the disobedient city, as He had said, and Nebuchadnezzar was 'the rod of His anger.'

Again, we learn the Divine reluctance to smite. More than four hundred years had passed since Solomon began idolatry, and steadily, through all that time, a stream of prophecy of varying force and width had flowed, while smaller disasters had confirmed the prophets' voices. 'Rising up early and sending' his servants, God had been in earnest in seeking to save Israel from itself. Men said then, 'Where is the promise of His coming?' and mocked His warnings and would none of His reproof; but at last the hour struck and the crash came. 'As a dream when one awaketh; so, O Lord! when Thou awakest, Thou shalt despise their image.' His judgment seems to slumber, but its eyes are open, and it remains inactive, that His long-suffering may have free scope. As long as His gaze can discern the possibility of repentance, He will not strike; and when that is hopeless, He will not delay. The explanation of the marvellous tolerance of evil which sometimes tries faith and always evokes wonder,

lies in the great words, which might well be written over the chair of every teacher of history: 'The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some men count slackness; but is long-suffering to us-ward.' Alas, that that divine patience should ever be twisted into the ground of indurated disobedience! 'Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.'

God's reluctance to punish is no reason for doubting that He will. Judgment is His 'strange work,' less congenial, if we may so paraphrase that strong word of the prophet's, than pure mercy, but it will be done nevertheless. The tears over Jerusalem that witnessed Christ's sorrow did not blind the eyes like a flame of fire, nor stay the outstretched hand of the Judge, when the time of her final fall came. The longer the delay, the worse the ruin. The more protracted the respite and the furler it has been of entreaties to return, the more terrible the punishment. 'Behold, therefore, the goodness and severity of God: towards them which fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in His goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off.'

THE FIRST BOOK OF CHRONICLES

THE KING'S POTTERS

'There they dwelt with the king for his work.'—1 CHRON. iv. 23.

IN these dry lists of names which abound in Chronicles, we now and then come across points of interest, oases in the desert, which need but to be pondered sympathetically to yield interesting suggestions. Here for example, buried in a dreary genealogical table, is a little touch which repays meditating on. Among the members of the tribe of Judah were a hereditary caste of potters who lived in 'Netaim and Gederah,' if we adhere to the Revised Version's text, or 'among plantations and hedges' if we prefer the margin. But they are also described as dwelling 'with the king.' That can only mean on the royal estates, for the king himself resided in Jerusalem. He, however, held large domains in the territory of Judah, on some of which these ceramic artists were settled down and followed their calling. They were kept on the royal estates and kept in comfort, not needing to till, but fed and cared for, that they might be free to mould, out of common clay, forms of beauty and 'vessels meet for the master's use.' Surely we may read into the brief statement of the text a meaning of which the writer of it never dreamt, and see in the description of these forgotten artisans, a symbol of our Christian relations to our Lord and of our life's work.

I. We, too, dwell with the King.

The Davidic king was in Jerusalem, and the potters were 'among plantations and hedges,' yet in a real sense they 'dwelt with the king,' though some of them might never have seen his face or trod the streets of the sacred city. Perhaps now and then he came to visit them on his outlying domains, but they were always parts of his household. And have we, Christ's æservants, not His gracious parting word: 'I am with you always'? True, we are not beside Him in the great city, but He is beside us in His outlying domains, and we may be with Him in His glory, if while we still outwardly live among the 'plantations and hedges' of this life, we dwell in spirit, by faith and aspiration, with our risen and ascended Lord. If we so 'dwell with the King,' He will dwell with us, and fill our humble abode with the radiance of His presence, 'making that place of His feet glorious.' That He should be with us is supreme condescension, that we should be with Him is the perfection of exaltation. How low He stoops, how high we can rise! The vigour of our Christian life largely depends on our keeping vivid the consciousness of our communion with Jesus and the sense of His real presence with us. How life's burdens would be lightened if we faced them all in the strength of the felt nearness of our Lord! How impossible it would be that we should ever feel the dreary sense of solitude, if we felt that unseen, but most real, Presence wrapping us round! It is only when our faith in it has fallen asleep that any earthly good allures, or any earthly evil frightens us. To be sure, in our thrilling consciousness, that we dwell with Jesus is an impenetrable cuirass that blunts the points of all arrows and keeps the breast that wears it unwounded in the fray. The world has

no voices which can make themselves heard above that low sovereign whisper: 'I am with you always, even to the end of the world'—and after the end has come, then we shall be with Him.

But we find in this notice a hint that leads us in yet another direction. They 'dwelt with the king' in the sense that they were housed and cared for on his lands. And in like manner, the true conception of the Christian life is that each of us is 'a sojourner with Thee,' set down on Christ's domains, and looked after by Him in regard to provision for outward wants. We have nothing in property, but all is His and held by His gift and to be used for Him. The slave owns nothing. The patch of ground which he cultivates for his food and what grows on it, are his master's. These workmen were not slaves, but they were not owners either. And we hold nothing as our own, if we are true to the terms on which it is given us to hold.

So if we rightly appreciate our position as dwelling on the King's lands, our delusion of possession will vanish, and we shall feel more keenly the pressure of responsibility while we feel less keenly the grip of anxiety. We are for the time being entrusted with a tiny piece of the royal estates. Let us not strut about as if we were owners, nor be for ever afraid that we shall not have enough for our needs. One sometimes comes on a model village close to the gates of some ducal palace, and notes how the lordly owner's honour prompts its being kept up to a high standard of comfort and beauty. We may be sure that the potters were well lodged and looked after, and that care for their personal wants was shifted from their shoulders to the king's. So should ours be. He will not leave His servants to starve. They should not

dishonour Him and disturb themselves by worries and cares that would be reasonable only if they had no Provider. He has said, 'All things are given to Me of My Father,' and He gives us all that God has given Him.

II. We dwell with the King for His work.

The king's potters had not to till the land nor do any work but to mould clay into vessels for use and beauty. For that purpose they had their huts and bits of ground assigned them. So with us, Christ has a purpose in His provision for us. We are set down on His domains, and we enjoy His presence and providing in order that, set free from carking cares and low ends, we may, with free and joyous hearts, yield ourselves to His joyful service. The law of our life should be that we please not ourselves, nor consult our own will in choosing our tasks, nor seek our own profit or gratification in doing them, but ever ask of Him: 'Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?' and when the answer comes, as come it will to all who ask with real desire to learn and with real inclination to do His will, that we 'make haste and delay not, but make haste to keep His commandments.' The spirit which should animate our active lives is plainly enough taught us in that little word, they 'dwelt with the king for his work.'

Nor are we to forget that, in a very profound sense, dwelling with the King must go before doing His work. Unless we are living continually under the operation of the stimulus of communion with Jesus, we shall have neither quickness of ear to know what He wishes us to do, nor any resolute concentration of ourselves on our Christ-appointed tasks. The spring of all noble living is communion with noble ideals, and fellowship with Jesus sets men agoing, as nothing else will, in

practical lives of obedience to Jesus. Time given to silent, retired meditation on that sweet, sacred bond that knits the believing soul to the redeeming Lord is not lost with reference to active work for Jesus. The meditative and the practical life are not antagonistic, but complementary. Mary and Martha are sisters, though sometimes they differ, and foolish people try to set them against each other.

But we must beware of a common misconception of what the King's work is. The royal potters did not make only things of beauty, but very common vessels designed for common and ignoble uses. There were vessels of dishonour dried in their kilns as well as vessels 'meet for the master's use.' There is a usual and lamentable narrowing of the term 'Christian work,' to certain conventional forms of service, which has done and is doing an immense amount of harm. The King's work is far wider in scope than teaching in Sunday-schools, or visiting the sick, or any similar acts that are usually labelled with the name. It covers all the common duties of life. A shallow religion tickets some selected items with the name; a robust, truer conception extends the designation to everything. It is not only when we are definitely trying to bring others into touch with Jesus that we are doing Him service, but we may be equally serving Him in everything. The difference between the king's work and the poor potters' own lay not so much in the nature as in the motive of it, and whatever we do for Christ's sake and with a view to His will is work that He owns, while a regard to self in our motive or in our end decisively strikes any service tainted by it out of the category.

We are to hallow all our deeds by drawing the

motive for them from the King and by laying the fruits of them at His feet. Thus, and only thus, will the most 'secular' actions be sanctified and the narrowest life be widened to contain a present Christ.

There are subsidiary motives which may legitimately blend with the supreme one. The potters would be stimulated to work hard and with their utmost skill when they thought of how well they were paid in house and store for their work. We have ample reasons for dedicating our whole selves to Jesus when we think of His gift of Himself to us, of His wages beforehand, of His joyful presence with His eye ever on us, marking our purity of motive and our diligence.

There is a final thought that may well stimulate us to put all our skill and effort into our work. The potters' work went to Jerusalem. It was for the king. What can be too good for him? He will see it, therefore let us put our best into it. And we shall see it too, when we too enter 'the city of the great King.' Jars that perhaps were wrought by these very workmen of whom we have been speaking turn up to-day in the excavations in Palestine. So much has perished and they remain, speaking symbols of the solemn truth that nothing human ever dies. Our 'works do follow us.' Let us so live that these may be 'found unto praise and honour and glory' at the appearing of 'the King.'

DAVID'S CHORISTERS

'They stood in their office, according to their order.'

1 CHRON. vi. 32 (R.V. margin).

THIS brief note is buried in the catalogue of the singers appointed by David for 'the service of song in the

house of the Lord.' The waves of their choral praise have long ages since ceased to eddy round the 'tabernacle of the tent of meeting,' and all that is left of their melodious companies is a dry list of names, in spite of which the dead owners of them are nameless. But the chronicler's description of them may carry some lessons for us, for is not the Church of Christ a choir, chosen to 'shew forth the praises of Him who has called us out of darkness into His marvellous light'? We take a permissible liberty with this fragment, when we use it to point lessons that may help that great band of choristers who are charged with the office of making the name of Jesus ring through the world. Now, in making such a use of the text, we may linger on each important word in it and find each fruitful in suggestions which we shall be the better for expanding in our own meditations.

We pause on the first word, which is rendered in the Authorised and Revised Versions 'waited,' and in the margin of the latter 'stood.' The former rendering brings into prominence the mental attitude with which the singers held themselves ready to take their turns in the service, the latter points rather to their bodily attitude as they fulfilled their office. We get a picture of the ranked files gathered round their three leaders, Heman, Asaph, and Ethan. These three names are familiar to us from the Psalter, but how all the ranks behind them have fallen dim to us, and how their song has floated into inaudible distance! They 'stood,' a melodious multitude, girt and attent on their song, or waiting their turn to fill the else silent air with the high praises of Jehovah, and glad when it came to their turn to open their lips in full-throated melody.

Now may we not catch the spirit of that long

vanished chorus, and find in the two possible renderings of this word a twofold example, the faithful following of which would put new vigour into our service? We are called to a loftier office, and have heavenly harmonies entrusted to us to be made vocal by our lips, compared with which theirs were poor. 'They waited on' their office, and shall not we, in a higher fashion, wait on our ministry, and suffer no inferior claims to block our way or hamper our preparedness to discharge it? To let ourselves be entangled with 'the affairs of this life,' or to 'drowse in idle cell,' sleepily letting summonses that should wake us to work sound unheeded and almost unheard, is flagrant despite done to our high vocation as Christians. 'They also serve who only stand and wait,' but not if in their waiting their eyes are straying everywhere but to their Master's pointing hand or directing eye. The world is full of voices calling Christ's folk to help; but what a host of so-called Christians fail to hear these piteous and despairing cries, because the noise of their own whims, fancies, and self-centred desires keeps buzzing in their ears. A constant accompaniment of deafness is constant noises in the head; and the Christians who are hardest of hearing when Christ calls are generally afflicted with noises which are probably the cause, and not merely an accompaniment, of their deafness. For indeed it demands no little detachment of spirit from self and sense, from the world and its clamant suitors, if a Christian soul is to be ready to mark the first signal of the great Conductor's baton, and to answer the lightest whisper, intrusting it with a task for Him, with its self-consecrating 'Here am I. Send me.'

It used to be said that they who watched for providences never wanted providences to watch for; it is

equally true that they who are on the watch for opportunities for service never fail to find them, and that ears pricked to 'hear what God the Lord shall speak,' summoning to work for Him, will not listen in vain. Paul saw in a vision 'a *man* of Macedonia' begging for his help, and 'straightway' he concluded that 'God had called' him to preach in Europe. Happy are these Christian workers who hear God's voice speaking through men's needs, and recognise a divine imperative in human cries!

May we not see in the attitude of David's choristers as they sang, hints for our own discharge of the tasks of our Christian service? There was a curse of old on him who did the work of the Lord 'negligently,' and its weight falls still on workers and work. For who can measure the harm done to the Christian life of the negligent worker, and who can expect any blessing to come either to him or to others from such half-hearted seeming service? The devil's kingdom is not to be cast down nor Christ's to be builded up by workers who put less than their whole selves, the entire weight of their bodies, into their toil. A pavior on the street brings down his rammer at every stroke with an accompanying exclamation expressing effort, and there is no place in Christ's service for dainty people who will not sweat at their task, and are in mortal fear of over-work. Strenuousness, the gathering together of all our powers, are implied in the attitude of Heman and his band as they 'stood' in their office. Idle revellers might loll on their rose-strewn couches as they 'sing idle songs to the sound of the viol and devise for themselves instruments of music, like David,' but the austerer choir of the Temple despised ease, and stood ready for service and in the best bodily posture for song.

The second important word of the text brings other thoughts no less valuable and rich in practical counsel. The singers in the Temple stood in their 'office,' which was song. Their special work was praise. And that is the highest task of the Church. As a matter of fact, every period of quickened earnestness in the Church's life has been a period marked by a great outburst of Christian song. All intense emotion seeks expression in poetry, and music is the natural speech of a vivid faith. Luther chanted the Marseillaise of the Reformation, 'A safe stronghold our God is still,' and many another sweet strain blended strangely with the fiery and sometimes savage words from his lips. The Scottish Reformation, grim in some of its features as it was, had yet its 'Gude and Godly Ballads.' At the birth of Methodism, as round the cradle at Bethlehem, hovered as it were angel voices singing, 'Glory to God in the highest.' A flock of singing birds let loose attends every revival of Christian life.

The Church's praise is the noblest expression of the Church's life. Its hymns go deeper than its creeds, touch hearts more to the quick, minister to the faith which they enshrine, and often draw others to see the preciousness of the Christ whom they celebrate. How little we should have known of Old Testament religion, notwithstanding law and prophets, if the Psalter had perished!

And it is true, in a very deep sense, that we shall do more for Christ and men by voicing our own deep thankfulness for His great gifts and speaking simply our valuation of, and our thankfulness for, what we draw from Him than by any other form of so-called Christian work. We can offend none by saying: 'We have found the Messiah,' and are adoringly glad that we

have. The most effectual way of moving other souls to participate in our joy is to let our joy speak. 'If you wish me to weep,' your own tears must not be held back, and if you wish others to know the preciousness of Christ, you must ring out His name with fervour of emotion and the triumphant confidence. We are the 'secretaries of God's praise,' as George Herbert has it, for we have possession of His greatest gift, and have learned to know Him in loftier fashion than Heman's choristers dreamed of, having seen 'the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ,' and tasted the sweetness of redeeming love. The Apocalyptic seer sets forth a great truth when he tells us that he first heard a new song from the lips of the representatives of the Church, who could sing, 'Thou wast slain and didst redeem us to God with Thy blood,' and then heard their adoration echoed from 'many angels round about the throne,' and finally heard the song reverberated from every created thing in heaven and earth, in the sea and all deep places. A praising Church has experiences of its own which angels cannot share, and it sets in motion the great sea of praise whose surges break in music and roll from every side of the universe in melodious thunder to the great white throne. Without our song even angel voices would lack somewhat.

' God said, " A praise is in Mine ear ;
 There is no doubt in it, no fear :
 Clearer loves sound other ways :
 I miss My little human praise." '

The song of the redeemed has in it a minor strain that gives a sweetness far more poignant than belongs to those who cannot say : ' Out of the depths I cried unto Thee.' ' The sweetest songs are those which tell of

saddest thought,' and recount experiences of conquered sin and life springing from death

But it is also true that no kind of Christian service will be effectual, if it lacks the element of grateful praise as its motive and mainspring. Perhaps there would be fewer complaints of toiling all night and wearily hauling in empty nets, if the nets were oftener let down not only 'at Thy word,' but with glad remembrance of the fishermen's debt to Jesus, and in the spirit of praise. When all our work is a sacrifice of praise, it is pleasing to God and profitable to ourselves and to others. If we would oftener bethink ourselves, and herald every deed with a silent dedication of it and of ourselves to Him who died for us, we should less often have to complain that we have sowed much and brought back little. A pinch of incense cast into the common domestic fire makes its flame sacrificial and fragrant.

The last important word of the text is also fertile in hints for us. The singers stood in their office 'according to their order.' That last expression may either refer to rotation of service or to distribution of parts in the chorus. They did not sing in unison, grand as the effect of such a song from a multitude sometimes is, but they had their several parts. The harmonious complexity of a great chorus is the ideal for the Church. Paul puts the same thought in a sterner metaphor when he tells the Colossian Christians that he joys 'beholding your order and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ,' where he is evidently thinking of the Roman legion with its rigid discipline and its solid, irresistible, ranked weight. Division of function and consequent concordant action of different parts is the lesson taught by both metaphors, and by the many modern examples of the immense results gained in

machinery that almost simulates vital action, and by organisations for great purposes in which men combine. The Church should be the highest example of such combination, for it is the shrine of the noblest life, even the life of its indwelling Lord. Every member of it should have and know his place. Every Christian should know his part in the great chorus, for he has a part, even if it is only that of tinkling the triangle in the orchestra or beating a drum. That division of function and concordance of action apply to all forms of the Church's action, and are enforced most chiefly by the great Apostolic metaphor of the body and its members. Paul did not delight in 'uniformity.' Inferiors calling themselves his successors have often aimed at enforcing it, but nature has been too strong for them, and the hedge will grow its own way in spite of pedants' shears. 'If the whole body were an eye, where the hearing?' The monotony of a church in which uniformity was the ideal would be intolerable. The chorus has its parts, and the soprano cannot say to the bass, 'I have no need of you,' nor the bass to the tenor, 'I have no need of thee.'

So let us see that we find our own place, and see that we fill it, singing our own part lustily, and not being either confused or made dumb because another has other notes to sing than are written on our score. Let us recognise unity made more melodious by diversity, the importance of the humblest, and 'having gifts differing according to the grace given unto us let us wait on our ministry,' and stand in our office according to our order.

DRILL AND ENTHUSIASM

'[Men that] could keep rank, they were not of double heart.'—1 CHRON. xii. 32.

THESE words come from the muster-roll of the hastily raised army that brought David up to Hebron and made him King. The catalogue abounds in brief characterisations of the qualities of each tribe's contingent. For example, Issachar had 'understanding of the times.' Our text is spoken of the warriors of Zebulon, who had left their hills and their flocks in the far north, and poured down from their seats by the blue waters of Tiberias to gather round their king. They were not only like their brethren expert in war and fully equipped, but they had some measure of discipline too, a rare thing in the days when there were no standing armies. They 'could keep rank,' could march together, had been drilled to some unanimity of step and action, could work and fight together, were an army, not a crowd, and not only so, but also 'they were not of double heart.' Each man, and the whole body, had a brave single resolve; they had one spirit animating the whole, and that was to make David king, an enthusiastic loyalty which made them brave, and a discipline which kept the courage from running to waste.

I take, then, this text as bringing before us two very important characteristics which ought to be found in every Christian church, and without which no real prosperity and growth is possible. These two may be put very briefly: organisation and enthusiastic devotion. These are both important, but in very different degrees. Organisation without valour is in

a worse plight than valour without organisation. The one is fundamental, the other secondary. The one is the true cause, so far as men are concerned, of victory, the other is but the instrument by which the cause works. There have been many victories won by undisciplined valour, but disciplined cowardice and apathy come to no good.

These two have been separated and made antagonistic, and churches are to be found which glory in the one, and others in the other. Some have gone in for order, and are like butterflies in a cabinet all ticketed and displayed in place, but a pin is run through their bodies and they are dead; and others have prided themselves on unfettered freedom, and been not an army, but a mob. The true relation, of course, is that life should shape and inform organisation, and organisation should preserve, manifest and obey life. There must be body to hold spirit, there must be spirit to keep body from rotting.

I. Organisation.

This is not the strong point of Nonconformist churches. We pride ourselves on our individualism, and that is all very well. We believe in direct access of each soul to Christ, that men must come to Him one by one, that religion is purely a personal matter, and the firmness with which we hold this tends to make us weak in combined action. It cannot be truthfully denied that both in the relations of our churches to one another, and in the internal organisation of these, we are and have been too loosely compacted, and have forgotten that two is more than one *plus* one, so that we are only helping to redress the balance a little when we insist upon the importance of organisation in our churches.

And first of all—remember the principles in subordination to which our organisation must be framed.

What are we united by? Common love and faith to Christ, or rather Christ Himself. ‘One is your Master, even Christ, and all ye are brethren.’ So there must be nothing in our organisation which is inconsistent with Christ’s supreme place among us, and with our individual obedience to Him. There are to be no ‘lords over God’s heritage’ in the Church of Christ. There are churches in which the temptation to be such affects the official chiefly, and there are others, with a different polity, in which it is chiefly a Diotrophes, who loves to have pre-eminence. Character, zeal, social station, even wealth will always confer a certain influence, and their possessors will be tempted to set up their own will or opinions as dominant in the Church. Such men are sinning against the very bond of Christian union. Organisation which is bought by investing one man with authority, is too dearly purchased at the cost of individual development on the individual’s own lines. A row of clipped yew-trees is not an inspiring sight.

And yet again what are we organised for? Not merely for our own growth or spiritual advantage, but also, and more especially, for spreading faith in Christ and advancing His glory. All our organisation, then, is but an arrangement for doing our work, and if it hinders that, it is cumbrous and must be cut away or modified, at all hazards. Ecclesiastical martinets are still to be found, to whom drill is all-important, and who see no use in irregular valour, but they are a diminishing number, and they may be recommended to ponder the old wise saying: ‘Where no oxen are, the crib is clean, but much increase is by the strength

of the ox.' If the one aim is a 'clean crib,' the best way to secure that is to keep it empty; but if a harvest is the aim, there must be cultivation, and one must accept the consequences of having a strong team to plough. The end of drill is fighting. The parade-ground and its exercising is in order that a corps may be hurled against the enemy, or may stand unmoved, like a solid breakwater against a charge which it flings off in idle spray, and the end of the Church's organisation is that it may move *en masse*, without waste, against the enemy.

But a further guiding principle to shape Christian organisation is that of the Church as the body of Christ. That requires that there shall be work for every member. Christ has endowed His members with varying gifts, powers, opportunities, and has set them in diverse circumstances, that each may give his own contribution to the general stock of work. Our theory is that each man has his own proper gift from God, 'one after this manner, and another after that.' But what is our practice? Take any congregation of Christian people in any of our churches, and especially in the Free Churches of which I know most, and is there anything like this wide diversity of forms of service, to which each contributes? A handful of people do all the work, and the remainder are idlers. The same small section are in evidence always, and the rest are nowhere. There are but a few bits of coloured glass in a kaleidoscope, they take different patterns when the tube is turned, but they are always the same bits of glass.

There needs to be a far greater variety of forms of work for our people and more workers in the field. There are too few wheels for the quantity of water

in the river, and, partly for that reason, the amount of water that runs waste over the sluice is deplorable. There is a danger in having too many spindles for the power available, but the danger in modern church organisation is exactly the other way.

Every one should have his own work. In all living creatures, differentiation of organs increases as the creature rises in the scale of being, from the simple sac which does everything up to the human body with a distinct function for every finger. It should not be possible for a lazy Christian to plead truly as his vindication that 'no man had hired' him. It should be the Church's business to find work for the unemployed.

The example in our text should enforce the necessity of united work. David's levies could keep rank. They did not let each man go at his own rate and by his own road, but kept together, shoulder to shoulder, with equal stride. They were content to co-operate and be each a part of a greater whole. That keeping rank is a difficult problem in all societies, where individual judgments, weaknesses, wills, and crotchets are at work, but it is apt to be especially difficult in Christian communities, where one may expect to find individual characteristics intensified, a luxuriant growth of personal peculiarities, an intense grip of partial aspects of the great truths and a corresponding dislike of other aspects of these, and of those whose favourite truths they are. One would do nothing to clip that growth, but still Christians who have not learned to subordinate themselves in and for united work are of little use to God or man. What does such united work require? Mainly the bridling of self, the curbing of one's own will, not insisting on forcing one's opinions on one's

brother, not being careful of having one's place secured and one's honour asserted. Without such virtues no association of men could survive for a year. If the world managed its societies as the Church manages its unity, they would collapse quickly. Indeed it is a strong presumption in favour of Christianity that the Churches have not killed it long ago. Vanity, pride, self-importance, masterfulness, pettishness get full play among us. Diotrephes has many descendants to-day. A cotton mill, even if it were a co-operative one, could not work long without going into bankruptcy, if there were no more power of working together than some Christian congregations have. A watch would be a poor timekeeper, where every wheel tried to set the pace and be a mainspring, or sulked because the hands moved on the face in sight of all men, while it had to move round and fit into its brother wheel in the dark.

Subordination is required as well as co-operation. For if there be harmonious co-operation in varying offices, there must be degrees and ranks. The differences of power and gift make degrees, and in every society there will be leaders. Of course there is no commanding authority in the Churches. Its leaders are brethren, whose most imperative highest word is, 'We beseech you.'

Of course, too, these varieties and degrees do not mean real superiority or inferiority in the eye of God. From the highest point of view nothing is great or small, there is no higher or lower. The only measure is quality, the only gauge is motive. 'Small service is true service while it lasts.' He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet, shall receive a prophet's reward. But yet there are, so far as our

work here is concerned, degrees and orders, and we need a hearty and ungrudging recognition of superiority wherever we find it. If the 'brother of high degree' needs to be exhorted to beware of arrogance and imposing his own will on his fellows, the 'brother of low degree' needs not less to be exhorted to beware of letting envy and self-will hiss and snarl in his heart at those who are in higher positions than himself. If the chief of all needs to be reminded that in Christ's household pre-eminence means service, the lower no less needs to be reminded that in Christ's household service means pre-eminence.

So much, then, for organisation. It is perfectly reconcilable with democracy that is not mob-ocracy. In fact, democracy needs it most. If I may venture to speak to the members of the Free Churches, with which I am best acquainted, I would take upon myself to say that there is nothing which they need more than that they should show their polity to be capable of reconciling the freest development of the individual with the most efficient organisation of the community. The object is work for Christ, the bond of their fellowship is brotherly union with Christ. Many eyes are on them to-day, and the task is in their hands of showing that they can keep rank. The most perfect discipline in war in old times was found, not amongst the subjects of Eastern despots who were not free enough to learn to submit, but amongst the republics of Greece, where men were all on a level in the city, and fell into their places in the camp, because they loved liberty enough to know the worth of discipline, and so the slaves of Xerxes were scattered before the resistanceless onset of the phalanx of the free. The terrible

legion which moved 'altogether when it moved at all,' and could be launched at the foe like one javelin of steel, had for its units free men and equals. There needs freedom for organisation. There needs organisation for freedom. Let us learn the lesson. 'God is not the author of confusion, but of order, in all churches of saints.'

II. Enthusiastic devotion.

These men came to bring David up to Hebron with one single purpose in their hearts. They had no sidelong glances to their own self-interest, they had no wavering loyalty, they had no trembling fears, so we may take their spirit as expressing generally the deepest requirements for prosperity in a church.

The foundation of all prosperity is a passion of personal attachment to Christ our King.

Christ is Christianity objective. Love to Christ is Christianity subjective. The whole stress of Christian character is laid on this. It is the mother of all grace and goodness, and in regard to the work of the Church, it is the ardour of a soul full of love to Jesus that conquers. The one thing in which all who have done much for Him have been alike is that single-hearted devotion.

But such love is the child of faith. It rests upon belief of truth, and is the response of man to God. Dwelling in the truth is the means of it. How our modern Christianity fails in this strong personal bond of familiar love!

Consider its effect on the individual.

It will give tenacity of purpose, will brace to strenuous effort, will subdue self, self-regard, self-importance, will subdue fear. It is the true anæsthetic. The soldier is unconscious of his wounds,

while the glow of devotion is in his heart and the shout of the battle in his ears. It will give fertility of resource and patience.

Consider its effect on the community.

It will remove all difficulties in the way of discipline arising from vanity and self which can be subdued by no other means. That flame fuses all into one glowing mass like a stream that pours from the blast furnace. What a power a church would be which had this! It is itself victory. The men that go into battle with that one firm resolve, and care for nothing else, are sure to win. Think what one man can do who has resolved to sell his life dear!

Consider the worthlessness of discipline without this.

It is a poor mechanical accuracy. How easy to have too much machinery! How the French Revolution men swept the Austrian martinets before them! David was half-smothered in Saul's armour. On the other hand, this fervid flame needs control to make it last and work. Spirit and law are not incompatible. Valour may be disciplined, and the combination is irresistible.

And so here, till we exchange the close array of the battlefield for the open ranks of the festal procession on the Coronation day, and lay aside the helmet for the crown, the sword for the palm, the breastplate for the robe of peace, and stand for ever before the throne, in the peaceful ranks of 'the solemn troops and sweet societies' of the unwavering armies of the heavens who serve Him with a perfect heart, and burn unconsumed with the ardours of an immortal and ever brightening love, let us see to it that we too are 'men that can keep rank and are not of double heart.'

DAVID'S PROHIBITED DESIRE AND PERMITTED SERVICE

'Then he called for Solomon his son, and charged him to build an house for the Lord God of Israel. 7. And David said to Solomon, My son, as for me, it was in my mind to build an house unto the name of the Lord my God : 8. But the word of the Lord came to me, saying, Thou hast shed blood abundantly, and hast made great wars : thou shalt not build an house unto My name, because thou hast shed much blood upon the earth in My sight. 9. Behold, a son shall be born to thee, who shall be a man of rest ; and I will give him rest from all his enemies round about : for his name shall be Solomon, and I will give peace and quietness unto Israel in his days. 10. He shall build an house for My name ; and he shall be My son, and I will be his Father ; and I will establish the throne of his kingdom over Israel for ever. 11. Now, my son, the Lord be with thee ; and prosper thou, and build the house of the Lord thy God as He hath said of thee. 12. Only the Lord give thee wisdom and understanding, and give thee charge concerning Israel, that thou mayest keep the law of the Lord thy God. 13. Then shalt thou prosper, if thou takest heed to fulfil the statutes and judgments which the Lord charged Moses with concerning Israel : be strong, and of good courage ; dread not, nor be dismayed. 14. Now, behold, in my trouble I have prepared for the house of the Lord an hundred thousand talents of gold, and a thousand thousand talents of silver ; and of brass and iron without weight ; for it is in abundance : timber also and stone have I prepared and thou mayest add thereto. 15. Moreover, there are workmen with thee in abundance, hewers and workers of stone and timber, and all manner of cunning men for every manner of work. 16. Of the gold, the silver, and the brass, and the iron, there is no number. Arise, therefore, and be doing, and the Lord be with thee.' —1 CHRON. **xxii.** 6-16.

THIS passage falls into three parts. In verses 6-10 the old king tells of the divine prohibition which checked his longing to build the Temple ; in verses 11-13 he encourages his more fortunate successor, and points him to the only source of strength for his happy task ; in verses 14-16 he enumerates the preparations which he had made, the possession of which laid stringent obligations on Solomon.

I. There is a tone of wistfulness in David's voice as he tells how his heart's desire had been prohibited. The account is substantially the same as we have in 2 Samuel vii. 4-16, but it adds as the reason for the prohibition David's warlike career. We may note the earnestness and the motive of the king's desire to build the Temple. 'It was in my heart' ; that implies earnest longing and fixed purpose. He had brooded

over the wish till it filled his mind, and was consolidated into a settled resolve. Many a musing, solitary moment had fed the fire before it burned its way out in the words addressed to Nathan. So should our whole souls be occupied with our parts in God's service, and so should our desires be strongly set towards carrying out what in solitary meditation we have felt borne in on us as our duty.

The moving spring of David's design is beautifully suggested in the simple words 'unto the name of the Lord my God.' David's religion was eminently a personal bond between him and God. We may almost say that he was the first to give utterance to that cry of the devout heart, 'My God,' and to translate the generalities of the name 'the God of Israel' into the individual appropriation expressed by the former designation. It occurs in many of the psalms attributed to him, and may fairly be regarded as a characteristic of his ardent and individualising devotion. The sense of a close, personal relation to God naturally prompted the impulse to build His house. We must claim our own portion in the universal blessings shrined in His name before we are moved to deeds of loving sacrifice. We must feel that Christ 'loved me, and gave Himself for me,' before we are melted into answering surrender.

The reason for the frustrating of David's desire, as here given, is his career as a warrior king. Not only was it incongruous that hands which had been reddened with blood should rear the Temple, but the fact that his reign had been largely occupied with fighting for the existence of the kingdom showed that the time for engaging in such a work, which would task the national resources, had not yet come. We may draw two valuable lessons from the prohibition. One is that it

indicates the true character of the kingdom of God as a kingdom of peace, which is to be furthered, not by force, but in peace and gentleness. The other is that various epochs and men have different kinds of duties in relation to Christ's cause, some being called on to fight, and others to build, and that the one set of tasks may be as sacred and as necessary for the rearing of the Temple as the other. Militant epochs are not usually times for building. The men who have to do destructive work are not usually blessed with the opportunity or the power to carry out constructive work. Controversy has its sphere, but it is mostly preliminary to true 'edification.' In the broadest view all the activity of the Church on earth is militant, and we have to wait for the coming of the true 'Prince of peace' to build up the true Temple in the land of peace, whence all foes have been cast out for ever. To serve God in God's way, and to give up our cherished plans, is not easy; but David sets us an example of simple-hearted, cheerful acquiescence in a Providence that thwarted darling designs. There is often much self-will in what looks like enthusiastic perseverance in some form of service.

II. The charge to Solomon breathes no envy of his privilege, but earnest desire that he may be worthy of the honour which falls to him. Petitions and exhortations are closely blended in it, and, though the work which Solomon is called to do is of an external sort, the qualifications laid down for it are spiritual and moral. However 'secular' our work in connection with God's service may be, it will not be rightly done unless the highest motives are brought to bear on it, and it is performed as worship. The basis of all successful work is God's presence with us, so David

prays for that to be granted to Solomon as the beginning of all his fitness for his task.

Next, David recalls to his son God's promise concerning him, that it may hearten him to undertake and to carry on the great work. A conviction that our service is appointed for us by God is essential for vigorous and successful Christian work. We must have, in some way or other, heard Him 'speak concerning us,' if we are to fling ourselves with energy into it.

The petitions in verse 12 seem to stretch beyond the necessities of the case, in so far as building the Temple is concerned. Wisdom and understanding, and a clear consciousness of the duty enjoined on him by God in reference to Israel, were surely more than that work required. But the qualifications for God's service, however the manner of service may be concerned with 'the outward business of the house of God,' are always these which David asked for Solomon. The highest result of true 'wisdom and understanding' given by God is keeping God's law; and keeping it is the one condition on which we shall obtain and retain that presence of God with us which David prayed for Solomon, and without which they labour in vain that build. A life conformed to God's will is the absolutely indispensable condition of all prosperity in direct Christian effort. The noblest exercise of our wisdom and understanding is to obey every word that we hear proceeding out of the mouth of God.

III. There is something very pathetic in the old king's enumeration of the treasures which, by the economies of a lifetime, he had amassed. The amount stated is enormous, and probably there is some clerical error in the numbers specified. Be that as it may, the sum was very large. It represented many an act

of self-denial, many a resolute shearing off of superfluities and what might seem necessities. It was the visible token of long years of fixed attention to one object. And that devotion was all the more noble because the result of it was never to be seen by the man who exercised it.

Therein David is but a very conspicuous example of a law which runs through all our work for God. None of us are privileged to perform completed tasks. 'One soweth and another reapeth.' We have to be content to do partial work, and to leave its completion to our successors. There is but one Builder of whom it can be said that His hands 'have laid the foundation of this house; His hands shall also finish it.' He who is the 'Alpha and Omega,' and He alone, begins and completes the work in which He has neither sharers nor predecessors nor successors. The rest of us do our little bit of the great work which lasts on through the ages, and, having inherited unfinished tasks, transmit them to those who come after us. It is privilege enough for any Christian to lay foundations on which coming days may build. We are like the workers on some great cathedral, which was begun long before the present generation of masons were born, and will not be finished until long after they have dropped trowel and mallet from their dead hands. Enough for us if we can lay one course of stones in that great structure. The greater our aims, the less share has each man in their attainment. But the division of labour is the multiplication of joy, and all who have shared in the toil will be united in the final triumph. It would be poor work that was capable of being begun and perfected in a lifetime. The labourer that dug and levelled the track and the engineer that drives the loco-

motive over it are partners. Solomon could not have built the Temple unless, through long, apparently idle, years, David had been patiently gathering together the wealth which he bequeathed. So, if our work is but preparatory for that of those who come after, let us not think it of slight importance, and let us be sure that all who have had any portion in the toil shall share in the victory, that 'he that soweth and he that reapeth may rejoice together.'

DAVID'S CHARGE TO SOLOMON

'And David assembled all the princes of Israel, the princes of the tribes, and the captains of the companies that ministered to the king by course, and the captains over the thousands, and captains over the hundreds, and the stewards over all the substance and possession of the king, and of his sons, with the officers, and with the mighty men, and with all the valiant men, unto Jerusalem. 2. Then David the king stood up upon his feet, and said, Hear me, my brethren, and my people: As for me, I had in mine heart to build an house of rest for the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and for the footstool of our God, and had made ready for the building: 3. But God said unto me, Thou shalt not build an house for My name, because thou hast been a man of war, and hast shed blood. 4. Howbeit the Lord God of Israel chose me before all the house of my father to be king over Israel for ever: for He hath chosen Judah to be the ruler; and of the house of Judah, the house of my father; and among the sons of my father He liked me to make me king over all Israel: 5. And of all my sons, (for the Lord hath given me many sons,) he hath chosen Solomon my son to sit upon the throne of the kingdom of the Lord over Israel. 6. And He said unto me, Solomon my son, he shall build My house and My courts: for I have chosen him to be My son, and I will be his father. 7. Moreover I will establish his kingdom forever, if he be constant to do My commandments and My judgments, as at this day. 8. Now therefore in the sight of all Israel the congregation of the Lord, and in the audience of our God, keep and seek for all the commandments of the Lord your God: that ye may possess this good land, and leave it for an inheritance for your children after you for ever. 9. And thou, Solomon my son, know thou the God of thy father, and serve Him with a perfect heart and with a willing mind: for the Lord searcheth all hearts, and understandeth all the imaginations of the thoughts: if thou seek Him, He will be found of thee; but if thou forsake Him, He will cast thee off for ever. 10. Take heed now; for the Lord hath chosen thee to build an house for the sanctuary: be strong, and do it.'—1 CHRON. xxviii. 1-10.

DAVID had established an elaborate organisation of royal officials, details of which occupy the preceding chapters and interrupt the course of the narrative. The passage picks up again the thread dropped at chapter xxiii. 1. The list of the members of the assembly

called in verse 1 is interesting as showing how he tried to amalgamate the old with the new. The princes of Israel, the princes of the tribes, represented the primitive tribal organisation, and they receive precedence in virtue of the antiquity of their office. Then come successively David's immediate attendants, the military officials, the stewards of the royal estates, the 'officers' or eunuchs attached to the palace, and the faithful 'mighty men' who had fought by the king's side in the old days. It was an assembly of officials and soldiers whose adherence to Solomon it was all-important to secure, especially in regard to the project for building the Temple, which could not be carried through without their active support. The passage comprises only the beginning of the proceedings of this assembly of notables. The end is told in the next chapter; namely, that the Temple-building scheme was unanimously and enthusiastically adopted, and large donations given for it, and that Solomon's succession was accepted, and loyal submission offered by the assembly to him.

David's address to this gathering is directed to secure these two points. He begins by recalling his own intention to build the Temple and God's prohibition of it. The reason for that prohibition differs from that alleged by Nathan, but there is no contradiction between the two narratives, and the chronicler has already reported Nathan's words (chap. xvii. 3, etc.), so that the motive which is ascribed to many of the variations in this book, a priestly desire to exalt Temple and ritual, cannot have been at work here. Why should there not have been a divine communication to David as well as Nathan's message? That hands reddened with blood, even though it had been shed in justifiable war, were not fitted to build the Temple, was a thought so far in advance of

David's time, and flowing from so spiritual a conception of God, that it may well have been breathed into David's spirit by a divine voice. Sword in one hand and trowel in the other are incongruous, notwithstanding Nehemiah's example. The Temple of the God of peace cannot be built except by men of peace. That is true in the widest and highest application. Jesus builds the true Temple. Controversy and strife do not. And, on a lower level, the prohibition is for ever valid. Men do not atone for a doubtful past by building churches, founding colleges, endowing religious or charitable institutions.

The speech next declares emphatically that the throne belongs to David and his descendants by real 'divine right,' and that God's choice is Solomon, who is to inherit both the promises and obligations of the office, and, among the latter, that of building the Temple. The unspoken inference is that loyalty to Solomon would be obedience to Jehovah. The connection between the true heavenly King and His earthly representative is strongly expressed in the remarkable phrase: 'He hath chosen Solomon . . . to sit upon the throne of the kingdom of Jehovah,' which both consecrates and limits the rule of Solomon, making him but the viceroy of the true king of Israel. When Israel's kings remembered that, they flourished; when they forgot it, they destroyed their kingdom and themselves. The principle is as true to-day, and it applies to all forms of influence, authority, and gifts. They are God's, and we are but stewards.

The address to the assembly ends with the exhortation to these leaders to 'observe,' and not merely to observe, but also to 'seek out' God's commandments, and so to secure to the nation, whom they could guide,

peaceful and prosperous days. It is not enough to do God's will as far as we know it; we must ever be endeavouring after clearer, deeper insight into it. Would that these words were written over the doors of all Senate and Parliament houses! What a different England we should see!

But Solomon was present as well as the notables, and it was well that, in their hearing, he should be reminded of his duties. David had previously in private taught him these, but this public 'charge' before the chief men of the kingdom bound them more solemnly upon him, and summoned a cloud of witnesses against him if he fell below the high ideal. It is pitched on a lofty key of spiritual religion, for it lays 'Know thou the God of thy fathers' as the foundation of everything. That knowledge is no mere intellectual apprehension, but, as always in Scripture, personal acquaintanceship with a Person, which involves communion with Him and love towards Him. For us, too, it is the seed of all strenuous discharge of our life's tasks, whether we are rulers or nobodies, and it means a much deeper experience than understanding or giving assent to a set of truths about God. We know one another when we summer and winter with each other, and not unless we love one another, and we know God on no other terms.

After such knowledge comes an outward life of service. Active obedience is the expression of inward communion, love, and trust. The spring that moves the hands on the dial is love, and, if the hands do not move, there is something wrong with the spring. Morality is the garment of religion; religion is the animating principle of morality. Faith without works is dead, and works without faith are dead too.

But even when we 'know God' we have to make

efforts to have our service correspond with our knowledge, for we have wayward hearts and obstinate wills, which need to be stimulated, sometimes to be coerced and forcibly diverted from unworthy objects. Therefore the exhortation to serve God 'with a perfect heart and with a willing mind' is always needful and often hard. Entire surrender and glad obedience are the Christian ideal, and continual effort to approximate to it will be ours in the degree in which we 'know God.' There is no worse slavery than that of the half-hearted Christian whose yoke is not padded with love. Reluctant obedience is disobedience in God's sight.

David solemnly reminds Solomon of those 'pure eyes and perfect judgment,' not to frighten, but to enforce the thought of the need for whole-hearted and glad service, and of the worthlessness of external acts of apparent worship which have not such behind them. What a deal of seeming wheat would turn out to be chaff if that winnowing fan which is in Christ's hand were applied to it! How small our biggest heaps would become!

The solemn conditions of the continuance of God's favour and of the fulfilment of His promises are next plainly stated. God responds to our state of heart and mind. We determine His bearing to us. The seeker finds. If we move away from Him, He moves away from us. That is not, thank God! all the truth, or what would become of any of us? But it is true, and in a very solemn sense God is to us what we make Him. 'With the pure Thou wilt show Thyself pure; and with the perverse Thou wilt show Thyself froward.'

The charge ends with recalling the high honour and office to which Jehovah had designated Solomon, and with exhortations to 'take heed' and to 'be strong, and

do it.' It is well for a young man to begin life with a high ideal of what he is called to be and do. But many of us have that, and miserably fail to realise it, for want of these two characteristics, which the sight of such an ideal ought to stamp on us. If we are to fulfil God's purposes with us, and to be such tools as He can use for building His true Temple, we must exercise self-control and 'take heed to our ways,' and we must brace ourselves against opposition and crush down our own timidity. It seems to be commanding an impossibility to say to a weak creature like any one of us, 'Be strong,' but the impossible becomes a possibility when the exhortation takes the full Christian form: 'Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might.'

THE WAVES OF TIME

'The times that went over him.'—1 CHRON. xxix. 30.

THIS is a fragment from the chronicler's close of his life of King David. He is referring in it to other written authorities in which there are fuller particulars concerning his hero; and he says, 'the acts of David the King, first and last, behold they are written in the book of Samuel the seer . . . with all his reign and his might, and the times that went over him, and over all Israel, and over all the kingdoms of the countries.'

Now I have ventured to isolate these words, because they seem to me to suggest some very solemn and stimulating thoughts about the true nature of life. They refer, originally, to the strange vicissitudes and extremes of fortune and condition which characterised, so dramatically and remarkably, the life of King David. Shepherd-boy, soldier, court favourite, outlaw,

freebooter and all but brigand; rebel, king, fugitive, saint, sinner, psalmist, penitent—he lived a life full of strongly marked alternations, and ‘the times that went over him’ were singularly separate and different from each other. There are very few of us who have such chequered lives as his. But the principle which dictated the selection by the chronicler of this somewhat strange phrase is true about the life of every man.

I. Note, first, ‘the times’ which make up each life.

Now, by the phrase here the writer does not merely mean the succession of moments, but he wishes to emphasise the view that these are epochs, sections of ‘time,’ each with its definite characteristics and its special opportunities, unlike the rest that lie on either side of it. The great broad field of time is portioned out, like the strips of peasant allotments, which show a little bit here, with one kind of crop upon it, bordered by another little morsel of ground bearing another kind of crop. So the whole is patchy, and yet all harmonises in effect if we look at it from high enough up. Thus each life is made up of a series, not merely of successive moments, but of well-marked epochs, each of which has its own character, its own responsibilities, its own opportunities, in each of which there is some special work to be done, some grace to be cultivated, some lesson to be learned, some sacrifice to be made; and if it is let slip it never comes back any more. ‘It might have been once, and we missed it, and lost it for ever.’ The times pass over us, and every single portion has its own errand to us. Unless we are wide awake we let it slip, and are the poorer to all eternity for not having had in our heads the eyes of the wise man which ‘discern both time and judgment.’ It is the same thought which is suggested by the well

known words of the cynical book of Ecclesiastes—'To every thing there is a season and a time'—an opportunity, and a definite period—'for every purpose that is under the sun.' It is the same thought which is suggested by Paul's words, 'As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good to all men. In due season we shall reap if we faint not.' There is 'a time for weeping and a time for laughing, a time for building up and a time for casting down.' It is the same thought of life, and its successive epochs of opportunity never returning, which finds expression in the threadbare lines about 'a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune,' and neglected, condemns the rest of a career to be hemmed in among creeks and shallows.

Through all the variety of human occupations, each moment comes to us with its own special mission, and yet, alas! to far too many of us the alternations do not suggest the question, what is it that I am hereby called upon to be or to do? what is the lesson that present circumstances are meant to teach, and the grace that my present condition is meant to force me to cultivate or exhibit? There is one point, as it were, upon the road where we may catch a view far away into the distance, and, if we are not on the lookout when we come there, we shall never get that glimpse at any other point along the path. The old alchemists used to believe that there was what they called the 'moment of projection,' when, into the heaving molten mass in their crucible, if they dropped the magic powder, the whole would turn into gold; an instant later and there would be explosion and death; an instant earlier and there would be no effect. And so God's moments come to us; every one of them—if we had eyes to see and hands

to grasp—a crisis, affording opportunity for something for which all eternity will not afford a second opportunity, if the moment be let pass. ‘The times went over him,’ and your life and mine is parcelled out into seasons which have their special vocation for and message to us.

How solemn that makes our life! How it destroys the monotony that we sometimes complain of! How it heightens the low things and magnifies the apparently small ones! And how it calls upon us for a sharpened attention, that we miss not any of the blessings and gifts which God is meaning to bestow upon us through the ministry of each moment! How it calls upon us for not only sharpened attention, but for a desire to know the meaning of each of the hours and of every one of His providences! And how it bids us, as the only condition of understanding the times, so as to know what we ought to do, to keep our hearts in close union with Him, and ourselves ever standing, as becomes servants, girded and ready for work; and with the question on our lips and in our hearts, ‘Lord, what wouldst Thou have me to do? and what wouldst Thou have me to do *now*?’ The lesson of the day has to be learned in a day, and at the moment when it is put in practice.

II. Another thought suggested by this text is, the Power that moves the times.

As far as my text represents—and it is not intended to go to the bottom of everything—these times flow on over a man, as a river might. But is there any power that moves the stream? Unthinking and sense-bound men—and we are all such, in the measure in which we are unspiritual—are contented simply to accept the mechanical flow of the stream of time. We

are all tempted not to look behind the moving screen to see the force that turns the wheel on which the painted scene is stretched. But, Oh! how dreary a thing it is if all that we have to say about life is, 'The times pass over us,' like the blind rush of a stream, or the movement of the sea around our coasts, eating away here and depositing its spoils there, sometimes taking and sometimes giving, but all the work of mere eyeless and purposeless chance or of natural causes.

Oh, brethren! there is nothing more dismal or paralysing than the contemplation of the flow of the times over our heads, unless we see in their flow something far more than that.

It is very beautiful to notice that this same phrase, or at least the essential part of it, is employed in one of the Psalms ascribed to David, with a very significant addition. He says, 'My times are *in Thy hand*.' So, then, the passage of our epochs over us is not merely the aimless flow of a stream, but the movement of a current which God directs. Therefore, if at any time it goes over our heads and seems to overwhelm us, we can look up through the transparent water and say, '*Thy waves and Thy billows have gone over me*,' and so I die not of suffocation beneath them. God orders the times, and therefore, though, as the bitter ingenuity of Ecclesiastes, on the lookout for proofs of the vanity of life, complained, in a one-sided view, as an aggravation of man's lot, that there is a time for everything, yet that aspect of change is not its deepest or truest. True it is that sometimes birth and sometimes death, sometimes joy and sometimes sorrow, sometimes building up and sometimes casting down, follow each other with monotonous uniformity

of variety, and seem to reduce life to a perpetual heaping up of what is as painfully to be cast down the next moment, like the pitiless sport of the wind amongst the sandhills of the desert. But the futility is only apparent, and the changes are not meant to occasion 'man's misery' to be 'great upon him,' as Ecclesiastes says they do. The diversity of the 'times' comes from a unity of purpose; and all the various methods of the divine Providence exercised upon us have one unchanging intention. The meaning of all the 'times' is that they should bring us nearer to God, and fill us more full of His power and grace. The web is one, however various may be the pattern wrought upon the tapestry. The resulting motion of the great machine is one, though there may be a wheel turning from left to right here, and another one that fits into it, turning from right to left there. The end of all the opposite motions is straight progress. So the varying times do all tend to the one great issue. Therefore let us seek to pursue, in all varying circumstances, the one purpose which God has in them all, which the Apostle states to be 'even your sanctification,' and let us understand how summer and winter, springtime and harvest, tempest and fair weather, do all together make up the year, and ensure the springing of the seed and the fruitfulness of the stalk.

III. Lastly, let me remind you, too, how eloquently the words of my text suggest the transiency of all the 'times.'

They 'passed over him' as the wind through an archway, that whistles and comes not again. The old, old thought, so threadbare and yet always so solemnising and pathetic, which we know so well that we forget it, and are so sure of that it has little effect

on life, the old, old thought, 'this too will pass away,' underlies the phrase of my text.

How blessed it is, brethren! to cherish that wholesome sense of the transiency of things here below, only those who live under its habitual power can fairly estimate. It is thought to be melancholy. We are told that it spoils joys and kills interest, and I know not what beside. It spoils no joys that ought to be joys. It kills no interests that are not on other grounds unworthy to be cherished. Contrariwise, the more fully we are penetrated with the persistent conviction of the transiency of the things seen and temporal, the greater they become, by a strange paradox. For then only are they seen in their true magnitude and nobility, in their true solemnity and importance as having a bearing on the things that are eternal. Time is the 'ceaseless lackey of eternity, and the things that pass over us may become, like the waves of the sea, the means of bearing us to the unmoving shore. Oh! if only in the midst of joys and sorrows, of heavy tasks and corroding cares, of weary work and wounded spirits, we could feel, 'but for a moment,' all would be different, and joy would come, and strength would come, and patience would come, and every grace would come, in the train of the wholesome conviction that 'here we have no continuing city.'

Cherish the thought. It will spoil nothing the spoiling of which will be a loss. It will heighten everything the possession of which is a gain. It will teach us to trust in the darkness, and to believe in the light. And when the times are dreariest, and frost binds the ground, we shall say, 'If winter comes, can spring be far behind?' The times roll over us, like

the seas that break upon some isolated rock, and when the tide has fallen and the vain flood has subsided, the rock is there. If the world helps us to God, we need not mind though it passes, and the fashion thereof.

But do not let us forget that this text in its connection may teach us another thought. The transitory 'times that went over' Israel's king are all recorded imperishably on the pages here, and so, though condensed into narrow space, the record of the fleeting moments lives for ever, and 'the books shall be opened, and men shall be judged according to their works.' We are writing an imperishable record by our fleeting deeds. Half a dozen pages carry all the story of that stormy life of Israel's king. It takes a thousand rose-trees to make a vial full of essence of roses. The record and issues of life will be condensed into small compass, but the essence of it is eternal. We shall find it again, and have to drink as we have brewed when we get yonder. 'Be not deceived, God is not mocked, for whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap.' 'There is a time to sow,' and that is the present life; 'and there is a time to gather the fruits' of our sowing, and that is the time when times have ended and eternity is here.

THE SECOND BOOK OF CHRONICLES

THE DUTY OF EVERY DAY

'Then Solomon offered burnt offerings unto the Lord . . . Even after a certain rate every day.'—(A. V.)

'Then Solomon offered burnt offerings unto the Lord, even as the duty of every day required it.'—2 CHRON. viii. 12-13 (R. V.).

THIS is a description of the elaborate provision, in accordance with the commandment of Moses, which Solomon made for the worship in his new Temple. The writer is enlarging on the precise accordance of the ritual with the regulations laid down in the law. He expresses, by the phrase which we have taken as our text, not only the accordance of the worship with the commandment, but its unbroken continuity, and also the variety in it, according to the regulations for different days. For the verse runs on, 'on the Sabbaths, and on the new moons, and on the solemn feasts, three times in the year, even in the Feast of unleavened bread, and in the Feast of weeks, and in the Feast of Tabernacles.' There were, then, these characteristics in the ritual of Solomon's Temple, precise compliance with the Divine commandment, unbroken continuity, and beautiful flexibility and variety of method.

But passing altogether from the original application of the words, I venture to do now what I very seldom do, and that is, to take this verse as a kind of motto. 'Even according as the duty of every day required'; the phrase may suggest three thoughts: that each

day has its own work, its own worship, and its own supplies, 'even as the duty of every day required.'

Each day has its own work.

Of course there is a great uniformity in our lives, and many of us who are set down to one continuous occupation can tell twelve months before what, in all probability, we shall be doing at each hour of each day in the week. But for all that, there is a certain individual physiognomy about each new day as it comes to us; and the oldest, most habitual, and therefore in some degree easiest and least stimulating, work has its own special characteristics as it comes again to us day by day for the hundredth time.

So there are three pieces of practical wisdom that I would suggest, and one is—be content to take your work in little bits as it comes. There is a great deal of practical wisdom in taking short views of things, for although we have often to look ahead, yet it is better on the whole that a man should, as far as he can, confine his anticipations to the day that is passing, and leave the day that is coming to look after itself. Take short views and be content to let each day prescribe its tasks, and you have gone a long way to make all your days quiet and peaceful. For it is far more the anticipation of difficulties than the realisation of them that wears and wearies us. If a man says to himself, 'This sorrow that I am carrying, or this work that I have to do, is going to last for many days to come,' his heart will fail. If he said to himself, 'It will be no worse to-morrow than it is at this moment, and I can live through it, for am I not living through it at this moment, and getting power to endure or do at this moment? and to-morrow will probably be like to-day,' things would not be so difficult.

You remember the homely old parable of the clock on the stair that gave up ticking altogether because it began to calculate how many thousands of seconds there are in the year, and that twice that number of times it would have to wag backwards and forwards. The lesson that it learned was—tick one tick and never mind the next. You will be able to do it when the time to do it comes. Let us act ‘as the duty of every day requireth.’ ‘Sufficient for the day is the work thereof.’

Then there is another piece of advice from this thought of each day having its own work, and that is—keep your ears open, and your eyes too, to learn the lesson of what the day’s work is. There is generally abundance of direction for us if only we are content with the one-step-at-a-time direction, which we get, and if another condition is fulfilled, if we try to suppress our own wishes and the noisy babble of our own yelping inclinations, and take the whip to them until they cease their barking, that we may hear what God says. It is not because He does not speak, but because we are too anxious to have our own way to listen quietly to His voice, that we make most of our blunders as to what the duty of every day requires. If we will be still and listen, and stand in the attitude of the boy-prophet before the glimmering lamp in the sacred place, saying, ‘Speak, Lord! for Thy servant heareth,’ we shall get sufficient instruction for our next step.

Another piece of practical wisdom that I would suggest is that if every day has its own work, we should buckle ourselves to do the day’s work before night falls and not leave any over for to-morrow, which will be quite full enough. ‘Do the duty that lies nearest thee,’ was the preaching of one of our sages,

and it is wholesome advice. For when we do that duty, the doing of it has a wonderful power of opening up further steps, and showing us more clearly what is the next duty. Only let us be sure of this, that no moment comes from God which has not in it boundless possibilities; and that no moment comes from God which has not in it stringent obligations. We neither avail ourselves of the one, nor discharge the other, unless we come, morning by morning, to the new day that is dawning upon us, with some fresh consciousness of the large issues that may be wrapped in its unseen hours, and the great things for Him that we may do ere its evening falls.

Each day has its tasks, and if we do not do the tasks of each day in its day, we shall fling away life. If a man had £100,000 for a fortune, and turned it all into halfpence, and tossed them out of the window, he could soon get rid of his whole fortune. And if you fling away your moments or live without the consciousness of their solemn possibilities and mystic awfulness, you will find at the last that you have made 'ducks and drakes' of your years, and have flung them away in moments without knowing what you were doing, and without possibility of recovery. 'Take care of the pence, the pounds will take care of themselves.' Take care of the days, and the years will show a fair record.

Secondly, we have here the suggestion that every day has its own worship.

As I remarked at the beginning of my observations, the chronicler dwells, with a certain kind of satisfaction, in accordance with the tone of his whole writings, upon the external ritual of the Temple; and points out its entire conformity with the divine precept, and

the unbroken continuity of worship day after day, year in year out, and the variation of the characteristics of that worship according as the day was more or less ritually important. From his words we may deduce a very needful though obvious and commonplace lesson. What we want is every-day religion, and that every-day religion is the only thing that will enable us to do what the duty of every day requires. But that every-day religion which will be our best ally, and power for the discharge of the obligations that each moment brings with it, must have its points of support, as it were, in special moments and methods of worship.

So, then, take that first thought: What we want is a religion that will go all through our lives. A great many of you keep your religion where you keep your best clothes: putting it on on Sunday and locking it away on the Sunday night in a wardrobe because it is not the dress that you go to work in. And some of you keep your religion in your pew, and lock it up in the little box where you put your hymn-books and your Bibles, which you read only once a week, devoting yourselves to ledgers or novels and newspapers for the rest of your time. We want a religion that will go all through our life; and if there is anything in our life that will not stand its presence, the sooner we get rid of that element the better. A mountain road has generally a living brooklet leaping and flashing by the side of it. So our lives will be dusty and dead and cold and poor and prosaic unless that river runs along by the roadside and makes music for us as it flows. Take your religion wherever you go. If you cannot take it in to any scenes or company, stop you outside.

There is nothing that will help a man to do his day's work so much as the realisation of Christ's Presence. And that realisation, along with its certain results, devotion of heart to Him and submission of will to His commandment, and desire to shape our lives to be like His, will make us masters of all circumstances and strong enough for the hardest work that God can lay upon us.

There is nothing so sure to make life beautiful, and noble, and pure, and peaceful, and strong as this—the application to its monotonous trifles of religious principles. If you do not do little things as Christian men and women, and under the influence of Christian principle, pray *what* are you going to do under the influence of Christian principle? If you are keeping your religion to influence the crises of your lives, and are content to let the trifles be ruled by the devil or the world and yourselves, you will find out, when you come to the end, that there were perhaps three or four crises in your experience, and that all the rest of life was made of trifles, and that when the crises came you could not lay your hand on the religious principle that would have enabled you to deal with them. The sword had got so rusty in its scabbard because it had never been drawn for long years, that it could not be readily drawn in the moment of sudden peril; and if you could have drawn it, you would have found its edge blunted. Use your religion on the trifles, or you will not be able to make much of it in the crises. 'He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much.' The worship of every day is the preparation for the work of that day.

Further, that worship, that religion, wearing its common, modest suit of workaday clothes, must also,

if there is to be any power in it, have a certain variety in its methods. 'Solomon offered burnt offerings . . . on the Sabbaths, on the new moons,' which had a little more ceremonial than the Sabbaths, 'and on the solemn feasts three times in a year,' which had still more ceremonial than the new moons, 'even in the Feast of unleavened bread, and in the Feast of weeks, and in the Feast of tabernacles.' These were spring-tides when the sea of worship rose beyond its usual level, and they kept it from stagnating. We, too, if we wish to have this every-day religion running with any strength of scour and current through our lives, will need to have moments when it touches high-water mark, else it will not flush the foulness out of our hearts and our lives.

Lastly, take the other suggestion, that every day has its own supplies.

That does not lie in the text properly, but for the sake of completeness I add it. Every day has its own supplies. The manna fell every day, and was gathered and consumed on the day on which it fell. God gives us strength measured accurately by the needs of the day. You will get as much as you require, and if ever you do not get as much as you require, which is very often the case with Christian people, that is not because God did not send enough manna, but because their *omer* was not ready to catch it as it fell. The day's supply is measured by the day's need. Suppose an Israelite had sat in his tent and said, 'I am not going out to gather,' would he have had any in his empty vessel? Certainly not. The manna lay all around the tent, but each man had to go out and gather it. God makes no mistakes in His weights and measures. He gives us each sufficient strength to do His will and

to walk in His ways; and if we do not do His will or walk in His ways, or if we find our burden too heavy, our sorrows too sharp, our loneliness too dreary, our difficulties too great, it is not because 'the Lord's hand is shortened that it cannot' supply, but because our hands are so slack that they will not take the sufficiency which He gives. In the midst of abundance we are starving. We let the water run idly through the open sluice instead of driving the wheels of life.

My friend! God's measure of supply is correct. If we were more faithful and humble, and if we understood better and felt more how deep is our need and how little is our strength, we should more continually be able to rejoice that He has given, and we have received, 'even as the duty of every day required.'

CONTRASTED SERVICES

'They shall be his servants: that they may know My service, and the service of the kingdoms of the countries.'—2 CHRON. xii. 8.

REHOBOAM was a self-willed, godless king who, like some other kings, learned nothing by experience. His kingdom was nearly wrecked at the very beginning of his reign, and was saved much more by the folly of his rival than by his own wisdom. Jeroboam's religious revolution drove all the worshippers of God among the northern kingdom into flight. They might have endured the separate monarchy, but they could not endure the separate Temple. So all priests and Levites in Israel, and all the adherents of the ancestral worship in the Temple at Jerusalem, withdrew to the southern kingdom and added much to its strength.

Rehoboam's narrow escape taught him neither

moderation nor devotion, his new strength turned his head. He forsook the law of the Lord. The dreary series, so often illustrated in the history of Israel, came into operation. Prosperity produced irreligion; irreligion brought chastisement; chastisement brought repentance; repentance brought the removal of the invader—and then, like a spring released, back went king and nation to their old sin.

So here—Rehoboam's sins take visible form in She-shak's army. He has sown the dragon's teeth and they spring up armed men. Shemaiah the prophet, the first of the long series of noble men who curbed the violence of Jewish monarchs, points the lesson of invasion in plain, blunt words: 'Ye have forsaken Me.' Then follow penitence and confession—and the promise that Jerusalem shall not be destroyed, but at the same time they are to be left as vassals and tributaries of Egypt—an anomalous position for them—and the reason is given in these words of our text.

I. The contrasted Masters.

Judah was too small to be independent of the powerful warlike states to its north and south, unless miraculously guarded and preserved. So it must either keep near God, and therefore free and safe from invasion, or else, departing from God and following its own ways, fall under alien dominion. Its experience was a type of that of universal humanity. Man is not independent. His mass is not enough for him to do without a central orb round which he may revolve. He has a choice of the form of service and the master that he will choose, but one or other must dominate his life and sway his motions. 'Ye cannot serve God and Mammon'; ye must serve God or Mammon. The solemn choice is presented to every man, but the misery of many lives is

that they drift along, making their election unawares and infallibly choosing the worse by the very act of lazily or weakly allowing accident to determine their lives. Not consciously and strongly to will the right, not resolutely and with coercion of the vagrant self to will to take God for our aim, is to choose the low, the wrong. Perhaps none, or very few of us, would deliberately say 'I choose Mammon, having carefully compared the claims of the opposite systems of life that solicit me, and with open-eyed scrutiny measured their courses, their goods and their ends.' But how many of us there are who have in effect made that choice, and never have given one moment's clear, patient examination of the grounds of our choice! The policy of drift is unworthy of a man and is sure to end in ruin.

It is not for me to attempt here to draw out the contrast between man's chief end and all other rival claimants of our lives. Each man must do that for himself, and I venture to assert that the more thoroughly the process of comparison is carried out, and the more complete the analysis not only of the rival claims and gifts, but of our capacities and needs, the more sun-clear will be the truth of the old, well-worn answer: 'Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him for ever.' The old woman by her solitary fireside who has learned that and practises it, has chosen the better part which will last when many shining careers have sunk into darkness, and many will-o'-the-wisps, which have been pursued with immense acclamations, have danced away into the bog, and many a man who has been envied and admired has had to sum up his successful career in the sad words, 'I have played the fool and erred exceedingly.' I cannot pretend to conduct the investigation for you, but I can press on every one who does not wish to let

accidents mould him, at least to recognise that there is a choice to be made, and to make it deliberately and with eyes open to the facts of the case. It is a shabby way of ruining yourself to do it for want of thought. The rabble of competitors of God catch more souls by accident than of set purpose. Most men are godless because they have never fairly faced the question: what does my soul require in order to reach its highest blessedness and its noblest energy?

II. The contrasted experience of the servants.

Judah learned that the yoke of obedience to God's law was a world lighter than the grinding oppression of the Egyptian invader.

God's service is freedom; the world's is slavery.

Liberty is unrestrained power to do what we ought. Man must be subject to law. The solemn imperative of duty is omnipresent and sovereign. To do as we like is not freedom, but bondage to self, and that usually our worst self, which means crushing or coercing the better self. The choice is to chain the beast in us or to clip the wings of the angel in us, and he is a fool who conceits himself free because he lets his inferior self have its full swing, and hustles his better self into bondage to clear the course for the other. There is but one deliverance from the sway of self, and it is realised in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free. To make self our master inevitably leads to setting beggars on horseback and princes walking. Passion, the 'flesh' is terribly apt to usurp the throne within when once God is dethroned. Then indulgence feeds passion, and deeper draughts become necessary in order to produce the same effects, and cravings, once allowed free play, grow in ravenousness, while their pabulum steadily loses its power to satisfy. The experience of the un

devout sensualist is but too faithful a type of that of all undevout livers, in the failure of delights to delight and of acquisitions to enrich, and in the bondage, often to nothing more worthy to be obeyed than mere habit, and in the hopeless incapacity to shake off the adamantine chains which they have themselves rivetted on their limbs. There are endless varieties in the forms which the service of self assumes, ranging from gross animalism, naked and unashamed, up to refined and cultured godlessness, but they are one in their inmost character, one in their disabling the spirit from a free choice of its course, one in the limitations which they impose on its aspirations and possibilities, one in the heavy yoke which they lay on their vassals. The true liberty is realised only when for love's dear sake we joyously serve God, and from the highest motive enrol ourselves in the household of the highest Person, and by the act become 'no more servants but sons.' Well may we all pray—

'Lord! bind me up, and let me lie
A prisoner to my liberty,
If such a state at all can be
As an imprisonment, serving Thee.'

God's service brings solid good, the world's is vain and empty.

God's service brings an approving conscience, a calm heart, strength and gladness. It is in full accord with our best selves. Tranquil joys attend on it. 'In keeping Thy commandments there is great reward,' and that not merely bestowed after keeping, but realised and inherent in the very act. On the other side, think of the stings of conscience, the illusions on which those feed who will not eat of the heavenly food, the husks of the swine-trough, the ashes for bread, that self and

the world, in all their forms set before men. A pathetic character in modern fiction says, 'If you make believe very much it is nice.' It takes a tremendous amount of make-believe to keep up an appetite for the world's dainties or to find its meats palatable, after a little while. No sin ever yields the fruit it was expected to produce, or if it does it brings something which was not expected, and the bitter tang of the addition spoils the whole. It may be wisely adapted to secure a given end, but that end is only a means to secure the real end, our substantial blessedness, and that is never attained but by one course of life, the life of service of God. We may indeed win a goodly garment, but the plague is in the stuff and, worn, it will burn into the bones like fire. I read somewhere lately of thieves who had stolen a cask of wine, and had their debauch, but they sickened and died. The cask was examined and a huge snake was found dead in it. Its poison had passed into the wine and killed the drinkers. That is how the world serves those who swill its cup. 'What fruit had ye *then* in those things whereof ye are *now* ashamed?' The threatening pronounced against Israel's disobedience enshrines an eternal truth: 'Because thou servedst not the Lord thy God with joyfulness, and with gladness of heart, by reason of the abundance of all things; therefore shalt thou serve thine enemies . . . in hunger and in thirst, and in nakedness and in want of all things.'

God's service has final issues and the world's service has final issues.

Only fools try to blink the fact that all our doings have consequences. And it augurs no less levity and insensibility to blink the other fact that these consequences show no indications of being broken short off

at the end of our earthly life. Men die into another life, as they have ever, dimly and with many foolish accompaniments, believed ; and dead, they are the men that they have made themselves while living. Character is eternal, memory is eternal, death puts the stamp of perpetuity on what life has evolved. Nothing human ever dies. The thought is too solemn to be vulgarised by pulpit rhetoric. Enough to say here that these two tremendous alternatives, Life and Death, express some little part of the eternal issues of our fleeting days. Looking fixedly into these two great symbols of the ultimate issues of these contrasted services, we can dimly see, as in the one, a wonder of resplendent glories moving in a sphere 'as calm as it is bright,' so, in the other, whirling clouds and jets of vapour as in the crater of a volcano. One shuddering glance over the rim of it should suffice to warn from lingering near, lest the unsteady soil should crumble beneath our feet.

But the true Lord of our lives loves us too well to let us experience all the bitter issues of our foolish rebellion against His authority, and yet He loves us too well not to let us taste something of them that we may 'know and see that it is an evil thing *and a bitter*, that thou hast forsaken the Lord thy God.' The experiences of the consequences of godless living are in some measure allowed to fall on us by God's love, lest we should persist in the evil and so bring down on ourselves still more fatal issues. It is mercy that here chastises the evildoer with whips, in hope of not having to chastise him with scorpions. God desires to teach us, by the pains and heartaches of an undevout life, by disappointments, foiled plans, wrecked hopes, inner poverty, the difference between His service and that of 'the king-

doms of the countries,' if haply He may not be forced to let the full flood of fatal results overwhelm us. It is best to be drawn to serve Him by the cords of love, but it is possible to have the beginnings of the desire so to serve roused by the far lower motives of weariness and disgust at the world's wages, and by dread of what these may prove when they are paid in full. Self-interest may sicken a man of serving Mammon, and may be transformed into the self-surrender which makes God's service possible and blessed. The flight into the city of refuge may be quickened by the fear of the pursuer, whose horse's hoofs are heard thundering on the road behind the fugitive, and whose spear is all but felt a yard from his back, but once within the shelter of the city wall, gratitude for deliverance will fill his heart and 'perfect love will cast out fear.'

The king concerning whom our text was spoken had to suffer humiliation by the Egyptian invasion. His sufferings were meant to be educational, and when they in some measure effected their purpose, God curbed the invader and granted some measure of deliverance. So is it with us, if, moved by whatever impulse, we betake ourselves to Jesus to save us from the bitter fruits of our evil lives. The extreme severity of the results of our sins does not fall on penitent, believing spirits, but some do fall. As the Psalmist says: 'Thou wast a God that forgavest them though Thou tookest vengeance of their inventions.' A profligate course of life may be forgiven, but health or fortune is ruined all the same. In brief, the so-called 'natural' consequences are not removed, though the sin which caused them is pardoned. Polluted memories, indulged habits, defiled imaginations, are not got rid of, though the sins that inflicted them are forgiven.

Is it not, then, the part of wise men to lay to heart the lessons of experience, and to let what we have learned of the bitter fruit of godless living turn us away from such service, and draw us by merciful chastisement to yield ourselves to God, whom to serve accords with our deepest needs and brings first fruits and pre-libations of blessedness and peace here, and fullness of joy with pleasures for evermore hereafter?

THE SECRET OF VICTORY

'The children of Judah prevailed, because they relied upon the Lord God and their fathers.'—2 CHRON. xlii. 18.

THESE words are the summing-up of the story of a strange old-world battle between Jeroboam, the adventurer who rent the kingdom, and Abijah, the son of the foolish Rehoboam, whose unseasonable blustering had played into the usurper's hands. The son was a wiser and better man than his father. It is characteristic of the ancient world, that before battle was joined Abijah made a long speech to the enemy, recounting the ritual deficiencies of the Northern kingdom, and proudly contrasting the punctilious correctness of the Temple service with the irregular cult set up by Jeroboam. He confidently pointed to the priests 'with their trumpets' in his army as the visible sign that 'God is with us at our head,' and while charging Israel with having 'forsaken the Lord our God,' to whom he and his people had kept true, besought them not to carry their rebellion to the extreme of fighting against their fathers' God, and assured them that no success could attend their

weapons in such a strife. The passionate appeal had no effect, but while Abijah was orating, Jeroboam was carrying out a ruse, and planting part of his troops behind Judah, so as to put them between two fires and draw a net round the outnumbered and outmanœuvred enemy.

Abijah and his men suddenly detected their desperate position, and did the only wise thing. When, with a shock of surprise, they saw that 'behold! the battle was before and behind them,' they 'cried unto the Lord, and the priests sounded with the trumpets.' The sharp, short cry from thousands of agitated men ringed round by foes, and the blare of the trumpets were both prayers, and heartened the suppliants for their whirlwind charge, before which the men of Israel, double in number as they were, broke and fled. The defeat was thorough, and, for a while, Rehoboam and his kingdom were 'brought under,' and a comparatively long peace followed. Our text gathers up the lesson taught, not to Judah or Israel alone, by victory and defeat, when it declares that to rely upon the Lord is to prevail. It opens for us the secret of victory, in that old far-off struggle and in to-day's conflicts.

I. We note the faith of the fighters.

'They relied,' says the chronicler, 'upon the Lord.' Now the word rendered 'relied' is one of several picturesque words by which the Old Testament, which we are sometimes told, with a great flourish of learning, has no mention of 'faith,' expresses 'trust,' by metaphors drawn from bodily actions which symbolise the spiritual act. The word here literally signifies to lean on, as a feeble hand might on a staff, or a tremulous arm on a strong one. And does not that

picture carry with it much insight into what the essence of Old Testament 'trust' or New Testament 'faith' is? If we think of faith as leaning, we shall not fall into that starved misconception of it which takes it to be nothing more than intellectual assent. We shall see there is a far fuller pulse of feeling than that beating in it. A man who leans on some support, does so because he knows that his own strength is insufficient for his need. The consciousness of weakness is the beginning of faith. He who has never despaired of himself has scarcely trusted in God. Abijah's enemies were two to one of his own men. No wonder that they cried unto the Lord, and felt a stound of despair shake their courage. And who of us can face life with its heavy duties, its thick-clustering dangers and temptations, its certain struggles, its possible failures, and not feel the cold touch of dread gripping our hearts, though strong and brave? Surely he has had little experience, or has learned little wisdom from the experience he has had, who has yet to discover his own weakness. But the consciousness of weakness is by itself debilitating, and but increases the weakness of which it is painfully aware. There is no surer way to sap what strength we have than to tell ourselves what poor creatures we are. The purpose and end of self-contemplation which becomes aware of our own feebleness is to lead us to the contemplation of God, our immortal strength. Abijah's assurance that 'God is with us at our head' rang out triumphantly. Faith has an upper and an under side: the under side is self-distrust; the upper, trust in God. He will never lean all his weight on a prop, who fancies that he can stand alone or has other stays to hold him up.

But Abijah's example teaches us another lesson—that for a vigorous faith, there must be obedience to all God's known will. True, thank God! faith often springs in its power in a soul that is conscious but of sin, but a continuance in disobedience will inevitably kill faith. It was because Abijah and his people had kept 'the charge of the Lord our God,' that they were sure that God was with them. We can only be sure of God to lean on when we are doing His will, and we shall do His will only as we are sure that we lean on Him. Our trust in Him will be strong and operative in the measure in which our lives are conformed to His commandments. Much elaborate dissertation has been devoted to expounding what faith is, and the strong, vivid Scriptural conception of it has been woefully darkened and overlaid with cobwebs of theology, but surely this eloquent metaphor of our text tells us more than do many learned volumes. It bids us lean on God, rest the whole weight of our needs, our weaknesses, and our sins on Him. Like any human friend or helper, He is better pleased when we lean hard on Him than when we gingerly put a finger on His arm, and lay no pressure on it, as we do when in ceremonial fashion we seem to accept another's support, and hold ourselves back from putting a weight on the offered arm. We cannot rely too utterly on Him. We honour Him most when we repose our whole selves on His strong arm.

II. The increase of faith by sudden fear.

'When Judah looked back, behold, the battle was before and behind them.' The shock of seeing the flashing spears in the rear would make the bravest hold their breath for one overwhelming moment, but the next moment their faith in God surged back with

tenfold force, increased by the sudden new peril. The sharp collision of flint and steel struck out a spark of faith. 'What time I am afraid, I will trust in Thee,' said an expert in the genesis and growth of trust. Peril kills a feeble trust, but vivifies it, if strong. The recognition of danger is meant to drive us to God. If each fresh difficulty or danger makes us tighten our clasp of Him, and lean the harder on Him, it has done its highest service to us, and we have conquered it, and are the stronger because of it. The storm that makes the traveller, fighting with the wind and the rain in his face, clasp his cloak tighter round him, does him no harm. The purpose of our trials is to drive us to God, and a fair-weather faith which had all but fallen asleep is often roused to energy that works wonders, by the sudden dash of danger flung into and disturbing a life. It is wise seamanship to make a run to get snugly behind the breakwater when a sudden gale springs up.

III. The expression of faith in appeal to God.

When the ambush was unmasked, the surrounded men of Judah 'cried unto the Lord, and the priests sounded with the trumpets,' before they flung themselves on the enemy. We may be sure that their cry was short and sharp, and poignant with appeal to God. There would be no waste words, nor perfunctory petitions without wings of desire, in that cry. Should we not look for the essential elements of prayer rather to such cries, pressed from burdened hearts by a keen sense of absolute helplessness, and very careless of proprieties so long as they were shrill enough to pierce God's ear and touch His heart, than to the formal petitions of well-ordered worship? A single ejaculation flung heavenward in a moment of despair or agony is

more precious in God's sight than a whole litany of half-hearted devotions.

The text puts in a striking form another lesson well worth learning, that, in the greatest crises, no time is better spent than time used for prayer. A rush on the enemy would not have served Abijah's purpose nearly so well as that moment's pause for crying to the Lord, before his charge. Hands lifted to heaven are nerved to clutch the sword and strike manfully. It is not only that Christ's soldiers are to fight and pray, but that they fight by praying. That is true in the small conflicts and antagonisms of the lives of each of us, and it is true in regard to the agelong battle against ignorance and sin. Christian's sword was named 'All-prayer.'

The priests, too, blew a prayer through their trumpets, for the ordinance had appointed that 'when ye go to war . . . then shall ye sound an alarm with the trumpets; and ye shall be remembered before the Lord your God, and ye shall be saved from your enemies.' The clear, strident blare was not intended to hearten warriors, or to sing defiance, but to remind God of His promises, and to bring Him on to the battlefield, as He had said that He would be. The truest prayer is that which but picks up the arrows of promise shot from heaven to earth, and casts them back from earth to heaven. He prays best who fills his mouth with God's words, turning every 'I will' of His into 'Do Thou!'

IV. The strength that comes through faith.

'As the men of Judah shouted, it came to pass that God smote Jeroboam and all Israel before Abijah and Judah.' There is no such quickener of all a man's natural force as even the lowest forms of faith. He

who throws himself into any enterprise sure of success will often succeed just because he was sure he would. The world's history is full of instances where men, with every odds against them, have plucked the flower safety out of the nettle danger, just because they trusted in their star, or their luck, or their destiny. We all know how a very crude faith turned a horde of wild Arabs into a conquering army, that in a century dominated the world from Damascus to Seville. The truth that is in 'Christian Science' is that many forms of disease yield to the patient's firm persuasion of recovery. And from these and many other facts the natural power of faith is beginning to dawn on the most matter-of-fact and unspiritual people. They are beginning to think that perhaps Christ was right after all in saying 'All things are possible to him that believeth,' and that it is not such a blunder after all to make faith the first step to all holiness and purity, and the secret of victory in life's tussle. Leaving out of view for the moment the supernatural effects of faith, which Christianity alleges are its constant consequences, it is clear that its natural effects are all in the direction of increasing the force of the trusting man. It calms, it heartens for all work, effort, and struggle. It imparts patience, it brightens hope, it forbids discouragement, it rebukes and cures despondency. And besides all this, there is the supernatural communication of a strength not our own, which is the constant result of Christian faith. Christian faith knits the soul and the Saviour in so close a union, that all that is Christ's becomes the Christian's, and every believer may hear His Lover's voice whispering to him what one of His servants once heard in an hour of despondency, 'My grace is sufficient for thee, for My power is made perfect in weakness.'

Faith joins us to the Lord, and 'he that is joined to the Lord is one spirit'; and that Lord has said to all His disciples, 'I give thee Myself, and in Myself all that is Mine.' We do not go to warfare at our own charges, but there will pass into and abide in our hearts the warlike might of the true King and Captain of the Lord's host, and we shall hear the ring of His encouraging voice saying, 'Be of good cheer! I have overcome the world.'

ASA'S REFORMATION, AND CONSEQUENT PEACE AND VICTORY

'And Asa did that which was good and right in the eyes of the Lord his God : 2. For he took away the altars of the strange gods, and the high places, and brake down the images, and cut down the groves : 4. And commanded Judah to seek the Lord God of their fathers, and to do the law and the commandment. 5. Also he took away out of all the cities of Judah the high places and the images : and the kingdom was quiet before him. 6. And he built fenced cities in Judah : for the land had rest, and he had no war in those years ; because the Lord had given him rest. 7. Therefore he said unto Judah, Let us build these cities, and make about them walls, and towers, gates, and bars, while the land is yet before us ; because we have sought the Lord our God, we have sought Him, and He hath given us rest on every side. So they built and prospered. 8. And Asa had an army of men that bare targets and spears, out of Judah three hundred thousand ; and out of Benjamin, that bare shields and drew bows, two hundred and fourscore thousand : all these were mighty men of valour.'—2 CHRON. xiv. 2-8.

ASA was Rehoboam's grandson, and came to the throne when a young man. The two preceding reigns had favoured idolatry, but the young king had a will of his own, and inaugurated a religious revolution, with which and its happy results this passage deals.

I. It first recounts the thorough clearance of idolatrous emblems and images which Asa made. 'Strange altars,'—that is, those dedicated to other gods; 'high places,'—that is, where illegal sacrifice to Jehovah was offered,

'pillars,'—that is, stone columns; and 'Asherim,'—that is, trees or wooden poles, survivals of ancient stone- or tree-worship; 'sun-images,'—that is, probably, pillars consecrated to Baal as sun-god, were all swept away. The enumeration vividly suggests the incongruous rabble of gods which had taken the place of the one Lord. How vainly we try to make up for His absence from our hearts by a multitude of finite delights and helpers! Their multiplicity proves the insufficiency of each and of all.

1 Kings xv. 13 adds a detail which brings out still more clearly Asa's reforming zeal; for it tells us that he had to fight against the influence of his mother, who had been prominent in supporting disgusting and immoral forms of worship, and who retained some authority, of which her son was strong enough to take the extreme step of depriving her. Remembering the Eastern reverence for a mother, we can estimate the effort which that required, and the resolution which it implied. But 1 Kings differs from our narrative in stating that the 'high places' were not taken away—the explanation of the variation probably being that the one account tells what Asa attempted and commanded, and the other records the imperfect way in which his orders were carried out. They would be obeyed in Jerusalem and its neighbourhood, but in many a secluded corner the old rites would be observed.

It is vain to force religious revolutions. Laws which are not supported by the national conscience will only be obeyed where disobedience will involve penalties. If men's hearts cleave to Baal, they will not be turned into Jehovah-worshippers by a king's commands. Asa could command Judah to 'seek the Lord God of

their fathers, and to do the law,' but he could not make them do it.

II. The chronicler brings out strongly the truth which runs through his whole book,—namely, the connection between honouring Jehovah and national prosperity. He did not import that thought into his narrative, but he insisted on it as moulding the history of Judah. Modern critics charge him with writing with a bias, but he learned the 'bias' from God's own declarations, and had it confirmed by observation, reflection, and experience. The whole history of Israel and Judah was one long illustration of the truth which he is constantly repeating. No doubt, the divine dealings with Israel brought obedience and well-being into closer connection than exists now; but in deepest truth the sure defence of our national prosperity is the same as theirs, and it is still the case that 'righteousness exalteth a nation.' 'The kingdom was quiet,' says the chronicler, 'and he had no war in those years; because the Lord had given him rest.' 1 Kings makes more of the standing enmity with the northern kingdom, and records scarcely anything of Asa's reign except the war which, as it says, was between him and Baasha of Israel 'all their days.' But, according to 2 Chronicles xvi. 1, Baasha did not proceed to war till Asa's thirty-sixth year, and the halcyon time of peace evidently followed immediately on the religious reformation at its very beginning.

Asa's experience embodies a truth which is substantially fulfilled in nations and in individuals; for obedience brings rest, often outward tranquillity, always inward calm. Note the heightened earnestness expressed in the repetition of the expression 'We have sought the Lord' in verse 7, and the grand assurance of His favour as the source of well-being in the clause

which follows, 'and He hath given us rest on every side.' That is always so, and will be so with us. If we seek Him with our whole hearts, keeping Him ever before us amid the distractions of life, taking Him as our aim and desire, and ever stretching out the tendrils of our hearts to feel after Him and clasp Him, all around and within will be tranquil, and even in warfare we shall preserve unbroken peace.

Asa teaches us, too, the right use of tranquillity. He clearly and gratefully recognised God's hand in it, and traced it not to his own warlike skill or his people's prowess, but to Him. And he used the time of repose to strengthen his defences, and exercise his soldiers against possible assaults. We do not yet dwell in the land of peace, where it is safe to be without bolts and bars, but have ever to be on the watch for sudden attacks. Rest from war should give leisure for building not only fortresses, but temples, as was the case with Solomon. The time comes when, as in many an ancient fortified city of Europe, the ramparts may be levelled, and flowers bloom where sentries walked; but to-day we have to be on perpetual guard, and look to our fortifications, if we would not be overcome.

ASA'S PRAYER

'And Asa cried unto the Lord his God, and said, Lord, it is nothing with Thee to help, whether with many, or with them that have no power: help us, O Lord our God; for we rest on Thee, and in Thy Name we go against this multitude. O Lord, Thou art our God; let not man prevail against Thee.'—2 CHRON. xiv. 11.

THIS King Asa, Rehoboam's grandson, had had a long reign of peace, which the writer of the Book of Chronicles traces to the fact that he had rooted out

idolatry from Judah. 'The land had rest, and he had no war . . . because the Lord had given him rest.'

But there came a time when the war-cloud began to roll threateningly over the land, and a great army—the numbers of which, from their immense magnitude, seem to be erroneously given—came up against him. Like a wise man he made his military dispositions first, and prayed next. He set his troops in order, and then he fell down on his knees, and spoke to God.

Now, it seems to me that this prayer contains the very essence of what ought to be the Christian attitude in reference to all the conditions and threatening dangers and conflicts of life; and so I wish to run over it, and bring out the salient points of it, as typical of what ought to be our disposition.

I. The wholesome consciousness of our own impotence.

It did not take much to convince Asa that he had 'no power.' His army, according to the numbers given of the two hosts, was outnumbered two to one; and so it did not require much reflection to say, 'We have no might.' But although perhaps not so sufficiently obvious to us, as truly as in the case in our text, if we look fairly in the face our duties, our tasks, our dangers, the possibilities of life and its certainties, the more humbly we think of our own capacity, the more wisely we shall think about God, and the more truly we shall estimate ourselves. The world says, 'Self-reliance is the conquering virtue'; Jesus says to us, 'Self-distrust is the condition of all victory.' And that does not mean any mere shuffling off of responsibility from our own shoulders, but it means looking the facts of our lives, and of our own characters, in the face. And if we will do that, however apparently easy may

be our course, and however richly endowed in mind, body, or estate we may be, if we all do that honestly, we shall find that we each are like 'the man with ten thousand' that has to meet 'the King that comes against him with twenty thousand'; and we shall not 'desire conditions of peace' with our enemy, for that is not what in this case we have to do, but we shall look about us, and not keep our eyes on the horizon, and on the levels of earth, but look up to see if there is not there an Ally that we can bring into the field to redress the balance, and to make our ten as strong as the opposing twenty. Zerah the Ethiopian, who was coming down on Asa, is said to have had a million fighting-men at his back, but that is probably an erroneous figure, because Old Testament numbers are necessarily often unreliable. Asa had only half the number; so he said, 'What can I do?' And what *could* he do? He did the only thing possible, he 'grasped at God's skirts, and prayed,' and that made all the difference.

Now all that is true about the disproportion between the foes we have to face and fight and our own strength. It is eminently true about us Christian people, if we are doing any work for our Master. You hear people say, 'Look at the small number of professing Christians in this country, as compared with the numbers on the other side. What is the use of their trying to convert the world?' Well, think of the assembled Christian people, for instance, of Manchester, on the most charitable supposition, and the shallowest interpretation of that word 'Christian.' What are they among so many? A mere handful. If the Christian Church had to undertake the task of Christianising the world by its own strength. we might well despair of success and stop altogether. 'We have

no might.' The disproportion both numerically and in all things that the world estimates as strength (which are many of them good things), is so great that we are in a worse case than Asa was. It is not two to one; it is twenty to one, or an even greater disproportion. But we are not only numerically weak. A multitude of non-effectives, mere camp followers, loosely attached, nominal Christians, have to be deducted from the muster-roll, and the few who are left are so feeble as well as few that they have more than enough to do in holding their own, to say nothing of dreaming of charging the wide-stretching lines of the enemy. So a profound self-distrust is our wisdom. But that should not paralyse us, but lead to something better, as it led Asa.

II. Summoning God into the field should follow wholesome self-distrust.

Asa uses a remarkable expression, which is, perhaps, scarcely reproduced adequately in our Authorised Version: 'It is nothing with Thee to help, whether with many or with them that have no power.' It is a strange phrase, but it seems most probable that the suggested rendering in the Revised Version is nearer the writer's meaning, which says, 'Lord! there is none beside Thee to help between the mighty and them that have no power,' which to our ears is a somewhat cumbrous way of saying that God, and God only, can adjust the difference between the mighty and the weak; can redress the balance, and by the laying of His hand upon the feeble hand can make it strong as the mailed fist to which it is opposed. If we know ourselves to be hopelessly outnumbered, and send to God for reinforcements, He will clash His sword into the scale, and make it go down. Asa turns to God and

says, 'Thou only canst trim the scales and make the lighter of the two the heavier one by casting Thy might into it. So help us, O Lord our God!'

One man with God at his back is always in the majority; and, however many there may be on the other side, 'there are more that be with us than they that be with them.' *There* is encouragement for people who have to fight unpopular causes in the world, who have been accustomed to be in minorities all their days, in the midst of a wicked and perverse generation. Never mind about the numbers; bring God into the field, and the little band, which is compared in another place in these historical Books to 'two flocks of kids' fronting the enemy, that had flowed all over the land, is in the majority. 'God with us'; then we are strong.

The consciousness of weakness may unnerve a man; and that is why people in the world are always patting each other on the back and saying 'Be of good cheer, and rely upon yourself.' But the self-distrust that turns to God becomes the parent of a far more reliable self-reliance than that which trusts to men. My consciousness of need is my opening the door for God to come in. Just as you always find the lakes in the hollows, so you will always find the grace of God coming into men's hearts to strengthen them and make them victorious, when there has been the preparation of the lowered estimate of one's self. Hollow out your heart by self-distrust, and God will fill it with the flashing waters of His strength bestowed. The more I feel myself weak, the more I am meant not to fold my hands and say, 'I never can do that thing; it is of no use my trying to attempt it, I may as well give it up'; but to say, 'Lord! there is none beside

Thee that can set the balance right between the mighty and him that hath no strength.' 'Help me, O Lord my God!' Just as those little hermit-crabs that you see upon the seashore, with soft bodies unprotected, make for the first empty shell they can find, and house in that and make it their fortress, our exposed natures, our unarmoured characters, our sense of weakness, ought to drive us to Him. As the unarmed population of a land invaded by the enemy pack their goods and hurry to the nearest fortified place, so when I say to myself I have no strength, let me say, 'Thou art my Rock, my Strength, my Fortress, and my Deliverer. My God, in whom I trust, my Buckler, and the Horn of my Salvation, and my high Tower.'

Now, there is one more word about this matter, and that is, the way by which we summon God into the field. Asa prays, 'Help us, O Lord our God! for we rest on Thee'; and the word that he employs for 'rest' is not a very frequent one. It carries with it a very striking picture. Let me illustrate it by a reference to another case where it is employed. It is used in that tragical story of the death of Saul, when the man that saw the last of him came to David and drew in a sentence the pathetic picture of the wearied, wounded, broken-hearted, discrowned, desperate monarch, *leaning on his spear*. You can understand how hard he leaned, with what a grip he held it, and how heavily his whole languid, powerless weight pressed upon it. And that is the word that is used here. 'We lean on Thee' as the wounded Saul leaned upon his spear. Is that a picture of your faith, my friend? Do you lean upon God like that, laying your hand upon Him till every vein on your hand stands out with the force and tension of the grasp? Or do you lean lightly, as a man that

does not feel much the need of a support? Lean hard if you wish God to come quickly. 'We rest on Thee; help us, O Lord!'

III. Courageous advance should follow self-distrust and summoning God by faith.

It is well when self-distrust leads to confidence, when, as Charles Wesley has it in his great hymn:

'. . . I am weak,
But confident in self-despair.'

But that is not enough. It is better when self-distrust and confidence in God lead to courage, and as Asa goes on, 'Help us, for we rely on Thee, and in Thy name we go against this multitude.' Never mind though it is two to one. What does that matter? Prudence and calculation are well enough, but there is a great deal of very rank cowardice and want of faith in Christian people, both in regard to their own lives and in regard to Christian work in the world, which goes masquerading under much too respectable a name, and calls itself 'judicious caution' and 'prudence.' There is little ever done by that, especially in the Christian course; and the old motto of one of the French republicans holds good; 'Dare! dare! always dare!' You have more on your side than you have against you, and creeping prudence of calculation is not the temper in which the battle is won. 'Dash' is not always precipitate and presumptuous. If we have God with us, let us be bold in fronting the dangers and difficulties that beset us, and be sure that He will help us.

IV. And now the last point that I would notice is this—the all-powerful plea which God will answer.

'Thou art my God, let not man prevail against Thee.' That prayer covers two things. You may be quite sure that if God is your God you will not be beaten; and

you may be quite sure that if you have made God's cause yours He will make your cause His, and again you will not be beaten.

'Thou art our God.' 'It takes two to make a bargain,' and God and we have both to act before He is truly ours. He gives Himself to us, but there is an act of ours required too, and you must take the God that is given to you, and make Him yours because you make yourselves His. And when I have taken Him for mine, and not unless I have, He is mine, to all intents of strength-giving and blessedness. When I can say, 'Thou art my God, and it is impossible that Thou wilt deny Thyself,' then nothing can snap that bond; and 'neither life nor death, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any *other* creature' can do it. But there is a creature that can, and that is I. For I can separate *myself* from the love and the guardianship of God, and He can say to a man, 'I am thy God,' and the man *not* answer, 'Thou art my God.'

And then there is another plea here. 'Let not man prevail against Thee.' What business had Asa to identify his little kingdom and his victory with God's cause and God's conquest? Only this, that he had flung himself into God's arms, and because he had, and was trying to do what God would have him do, he was quite sure that it was not Asa but Jehovah that the million of Ethiopians were fighting against. People warn us against the fanaticism of taking for granted that our cause is God's cause. Well, we need the warning sometimes, but we may be quite sure of this, that if we have made God's cause ours, He will make our cause His, down to the minutest point in our daily lives.

And then, if thus we say in the depths of our hearts, and live accordingly, 'There is none other that fighteth for us, but only Thou, O God!' it will be with us as it was with Asa in the story before us, 'the enemy fled, and could not recover themselves, for they were destroyed before the Lord and before His hosts.'

THE SEARCH THAT ALWAYS FINDS

'They . . . sought Him with their whole desire ; and He was found of them : and the Lord gave them rest round about.'—2 CHRON. xv. 15.

THESE words occur in one of the least familiar passages of the Old Testament. They describe an incident in the reign of Asa, who was the grandson of Solomon's foolish son Rehoboam, and was consequently the third king of Judah after the secession of the North. He had just won a great victory, and was returning with his triumphant army to Jerusalem, when there met him a prophet, unknown otherwise, who poured out fiery words, exhorting Asa and his people to cleave to God and to cast away their idols. Asa, encouraged by the prophetic words of this bold speaker for God, screwed himself up, and was able to induce also his people, to effect a great religious reformation. He made a clean sweep of the idols, and gathered the sadly-dwindled nation together in Jerusalem, where they renewed the covenant with the Lord God of their fathers. The text sums up their work and its result. 'They sought Him with their whole heart, and He was found of them ; and the Lord gave them rest round about.' The words express in simplest form what should be the chief desire of our hearts and occupation of our lives,

and what will then be our peaceful experience. We shall best bring out these points if we take the words just as they lie, and consider the seeking, the finding which certainly crowns that seeking, and the rest which ensues on finding God.

I. The seeking.

Now, of course, there is no doubt that what the chronicler meant to describe by the phrase, 'seeking the Lord,' was largely the mere external acts of ritual worship, the superficial turning from idols to a purely external recognition of God as the God of Israel. But while there may have been nothing deeper than a change in the nominal object of nominal worship, so far as many were concerned, no doubt a very real turning of heart to God underlay the external change in many other cases, of which the destruction of idols and the renewed observance of the form of Jehovah's worship were the consequence and sign. That turning of mind, will, and affection towards God must be ours if we are to be among those wise and happy seekers who are sure to find that which—or rather Him whom—they seek and to rest in Him whom they find. That search is not after a lost treasure, nor does it imply ignorance of where its object is to be found. We seek that which we know, and which we may be assured of finding. Therefore there need be no tremors of uncertainty in our quest, and the blessedness of the search is as real as, though different from, the blessedness of the possession which ends it. The famous saying which prefers the search after, to the possession of truth, is more proud than wise; but the comparison which it institutes is so far true that there is a joy in the aspiration after and the efforts towards truth only less joyous than that which attends its attainment. But truth divorced from

God is finite and may pall, become familiar and lose its radiance, like a gathered flower; and hence the preference for the search is intelligible though one-sided. But God does not pall, and the more we find Him the more we delight in Him; the highest bliss is to find Him, the next highest is to seek Him; and, since seeking and finding Him are never wholly separate, these kindred joys blend their lights in the experience of all His children.

But our text lays emphasis on the whole-heartedness of the people's seeking of God. The search must be earnest and engaged in with the whole energy of our whole being, if any blessing is to come from it. Why! one reason why the great mass of professing Christians make so little of their religion is because they are only half-hearted in it. If you divide a river into two streams the force of each is less than half the power of the original current; and the chances are that you will make a stagnant marsh where there used to be a flowing stream. 'All in all, or not at all,' is the rule for life, in all departments. It is the rule in daily business. A man that puts only half himself in his profession or trade, while the other half of his wits is gone wool-gathering and dreaming, is predestined from all eternity to fail. The same is true about our religion. If you and I attend to it as a kind of by-occupation; if we give the balance of our time and the superfluity of our energy, after we have done a hard day's work—say, an hour upon a Sunday—to seeking God, and devote all the rest of the week to seeking worldly prosperity, it is no wonder if our religion languishes, and is mainly a matter of forms, as it is with such hosts of people that call themselves Christians.

Oh! dear brethren, I do believe there is more un-

conscious unreality in the average Christian man's endeavour to be a better Christian than there is in almost anything else in the world :—

‘One foot on sea, and one on shore,
To one thing constant never.’

That is why so many of us know nothing of a progressive strengthening of our faith, and an increasing conquest of ourselves, and a firmer grasp of God, and a fuller realisation of the blessedness of walking in His ways.

‘They sought Him with all their heart.’ That does not mean, remember, that there are to be no other desires, for it is a great mistake to pit religion against other things which are meant to be its instruments and its helps. We are not required to seek nothing else in order to seek God wholly. He demands no impossible and fantastic detachment of ourselves from the ordinary and legitimate occupations, affections, and duties of human life, but He does ask that the dominant desire after Him should be powerful enough to express itself through all our actions, and that we should seek for God in them, and for them in God.

Whilst thus we are to give the right interpretation to that whole-heartedness in our seeking God, on which the text lays stress, do not let us forget that the one token of it which the text specifies is, casting out our idols. There must be detachment if there is to be attachment. If some climbing plant, for instance, has twisted itself round the unprofitable thorns in the hedge, the gardener, before he can get it to go up the support that it is meant to encircle, has carefully to detach it from the stays to which it has wantonly clung, taking care that in the process he does not break its

tendrils and destroy its power of growth. So, to train our souls to cleave to God, and to grow up round the great Stay that is provided for us, there is needed, as an essential part of the process, the voluntary, conscious, conscientious, and constant guarding of ourselves from the vagrancies of our desires, which send out their shoots away from Him; and when the objects of these become idols, then there is nothing for it but that, like Asa and his people, we should hew them to pieces and make a bonfire of them; and then renew our covenant before God. I desire to press that upon you and upon myself. The heart must be emptied of baser liquors, if the new wine of the Kingdom is to be poured into it.

True it is, of course—and thank God for it!—that the most powerful agent in effecting that detachment of ourselves from lower things is our fruition of higher. It is when God comes into the temple that Dagon falls on the threshold. It is when a new affection begins to spring in the heart that old loves are thrust out of it. But whilst that is true, it is also true that the two processes run on simultaneously; and that whilst, on the one hand, if we are ever to overcome our love of the world it must be through the love of God, on the other hand, if we are ever to be confirmed in a whole-hearted love of God, it must be through our conquest of our love of the world. ‘Unite my heart to fear Thy name’ was the profound prayer of the old Psalmist; and the ‘heart,’ according to Old Testament usage, is the central fountain from which flow all the streams of conscious life. To seek Him with the whole heart is to engage the whole self in the quest, and that is the only kind of seeking which has the certainty of success.

II. The finding which crowns such seeking.

'He was found of them.' Yes; anything is possible rather than that a whole-hearted search after God should be a vain search. For there are, in that case, *two* seekers—God is seeking for us more truly than we are seeking for Him. And if the mother is seeking her child, and the child its mother, it will be a very wide desert where they will not meet. 'The Father seeketh such to worship Him,' that is—the divine activity is going about the world, searching for the heart that turns to Him, and it cannot but be that they that seek Him shall find Him, or 'shall be found of Him.' Open the windows, and you cannot keep out the sunshine; open your lungs and you cannot keep out the air. 'In Him we live and move and have our being,' and if our desires turn, however blindly, to Him, and are accompanied with the appropriate action, heaven and earth are more likely to rush to ruin than such a searching to be frustrated of its aim.

Brethren! is there anything else in the world of which you can say, 'Seek, and ye shall find'? You, with white hairs on your heads, have you found anything else in which the chase was sure to result in the capture; in which capture was sure to yield all that the hunter had wished? There is only one direction for a man's desires and aims, in which disappointment is an impossibility. In all other regions the most that can be promised is 'Seek, and *perhaps* you will find'; and, when you have found, perhaps you will feel that the prize was not worth the finding. Or it is, 'Seek, and *possibly* you will find; and after you have found and kept for a little while, you will lose.' Though it may be

'Better to have loved and lost,
Than never to have loved at all,'

a treasure that slips out of our fingers is not the best treasure that we can search for. But here the assurance is, 'Seek, and ye *shall* find; and shall never lose. Find, and you shall always possess.'

What would you think of a company of gold-seekers, hunting about in some exhausted claim, for hypothetical grains, ragged, starving—and all the while in the next gully were lying lumps of gold for the picking up? And that figure fairly represents what people do and suffer who seek for good and do not seek for God.

III. The rest which ensues on finding God.

'The Lord gave them rest round about.' We believe that the Jewish nation was under special supernatural guidance, so that national adherence to the Law was always followed by external prosperity. That is not, of course, the case with us. But which is the better thing, 'rest round about' or rest within? We have no immunity from toil or conflict. Seeking God does not cover our heads from the storm of external calamities, nor arm our hearts against the darts and daggers of many a pain, anxiety, and care, but disturbance around is a very small matter if there be a better thing, rest within.

Do you remember who it was that said, 'In the world ye shall have tribulation . . . but in Me ye shall have peace'? Then we have, as it were, two abodes—one, as far as regards the life of sense, in the world of sense—another, as far as regards the inmost self, which may, if we will, be in Christ. A vessel with an outer casing and a layer of air between it and the inner will keep its contents hot. So we may have round us the very opposite of repose, and, if God so wills, let us not kick against His will; we may have conflict and stir and strife, and yet a better rest than that of my text

may be ours. 'Rest round about' is sometimes good and sometimes bad. It is often bad, for it is the people that 'have no changes' who most usually 'do not fear God.' But rest within, that is sure to come when a man has sought with all his desire for God, whom he has found in all His fullness, is only good and best of all.

We all know, thank God! in worldly matters and in inferior degree, how blessed and restful it is when some strong affection is gratified, some cherished desire fulfilled. Though these satisfactions are not perpetual, nor perfect, they may teach us what a depth of blessed and calm repose, incapable of being broken by any storms or by any tasks, will come to and abide with the man whose deepest love is satisfied in God, and whose most ardent desires have found more than they sought for in Him. Be sure of this, dear friends! that if we do thus seek, and thus find, it is not in the power of anything 'that is at enmity with joy' utterly to 'abolish or destroy' the quietness of our hearts. 'Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him.' They who thus repose will have peace in their hearts, even whilst tasks and temptations, changes and sorrows, disturb their outward lives. 'In the world ye shall have tribulation.' Be it so; it may be borne with submission and thankfulness if in Christ we have peace.

Thus we may have the peace of God, rest in and from Him, entering into us, and in due time, by His gracious guidance and help, we shall enter into eternal rest. Whilst to seek is to find Him, in a very deep and blessed sense, even in this life; in another aspect all our earthly life may be regarded as seeking after Him, and the future as the true finding of Him. That future will bring to those whose hearts have turned from the

shows and vanities of time to God a possession of Him so much fuller than was experienced here that the lesser discoveries and enjoyments of Him which are experienced here, scarcely deserve in comparison to be called by the same name. So my text may be taken, as in its first part, a description of the blessed life here—‘They sought Him with all their heart’—and in its second, as a shadowy vision of the yet more blessed life hereafter, ‘He was found of them, and the Lord gave them rest round about,’ as well as within, in the land of peace, where sorrow and sighing, and toil and care, shall pass from memory; and they that warred against us shall be far away.

JEHOSHAPHAT'S REFORM

‘And Jehoshaphat his son reigned in his stead, and strengthened himself against Israel. 2. And he placed forces in all the fenced cities of Judah, and set garrisons in the land of Judah, and in the cities of Ephraim, which Asa his father had taken. 3. And the Lord was with Jehoshaphat, because he walked in the first ways of his father David, and sought not unto Baalim; 4. But sought to the Lord God of his father, and walked in His commandments, and not after the doings of Israel. 5. Therefore the Lord established the kingdom in his hand; and all Judah brought to Jehoshaphat presents; and he had riches and honour in abundance. 6. And his heart was lifted up in the ways of the Lord: moreover he took away the high places and groves out of Judah. 7. Also in the third year of his reign he sent to his princes, even to Ben-hail, and to Obadiah, and to Zechariah, and to Nethaneel, and to Michajah, to teach in the cities of Judah. 8. And with them he sent Levites, even Shemaiah, and Nethaniah, and Zebadiah, and Asabel, and Shemiramoth, and Jehonathan, and Adonijah, and Tobijah, and Tob-adonijah, Levites: and with them Elishama and Jehoram, priests. 9. And they taught in Judah, and had the book of the law of the Lord with them, and went about throughout all the cities of Judah, and taught the people. 10. And the fear of the Lord fell upon all the kingdoms of the lands that were round about Judah, so that they made no war against Jehoshaphat.’—2 CHRON. xvii. 1-10.

THE first point to be noted in this passage is that Jehoshaphat followed in the steps of Asa his father. Stress is laid on his adherence to the ancestral faith, ‘the first ways of his father David,’—before his great fall,—and the paternal example, ‘he sought to the God of his father.’ Such carrying on of a predecessor’s work

is rare in the line of kings of Judah, where father and son were seldom of the same mind in religion. The principle of hereditary monarchy secures peaceful succession, but not continuity of policy. Many a king of Judah had to say in his heart what Ecclesiastes puts into Solomon's mouth, 'I hated all my labour, . . . seeing that I must leave it unto the man that shall be after me. And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool?'

But it is not only in kings' houses that that experience is realised. Many a home is saddened to-day because the children do not seek the God of their fathers. 'Instead of the fathers' should 'come up thy children'; but, alas! grandmother Lois and mother Eunice do not always see the boy who has known the Scriptures from a child grow up into a Timothy, in whom their unfeigned faith lives again. The neglect of religious instruction in professedly Christian families, the inconsistent lives of parents or their too rigid restraints, or, sometimes, their too lax discipline, are to be blamed for many such cases. But there are many instances in which not the parents, but the children, are to be blamed. An earnest Sunday-school teacher may do much to lead the children of godly parents to their father's God. Blessed is the home where the golden chain of common faith binds hearts together, and family love is elevated and hallowed by common love of God!

Jehoshaphat's religion was, further, resolutely held in the face of prevailing opposition. 'The Baalim' were popular; it was fashionable to worship them. They were numerous, and all varieties of taste could find a Baal to please them. But this young king turned from the tempting ways that opened flower-strewn before

him, and chose the narrow road that led upwards. 'So did not I, because of the fear of God,' might have been his motto. A similar determined setting of our faces God-ward, in spite of the crowd of tempting false deities around us, must mark us, if we are to have any religion worth calling by the name. This king recoiled from the example of the neighbouring monarchy, and walked 'not after the doings of Israel.' His seeking to God was very practical, for it was not shown simply by professed beliefs or by sentiment, but by ordering his life in obedience to God's will. The test of real religion is, after all, a life unlike the lives of the men who do not share our faith, and moulded in accordance with God's known will. It is vain to allege that we are seeking the Lord unless we are walking in His commandments.

Prosperity followed godliness, in accordance with the divinely appointed connection between them which characterised the Old Dispensation. 'Prosperity is the blessing of the Old Testament; adversity is the blessing of the New,' says Bacon. But the epigram is too neat to be entirely true, for the Book of Job and many a psalm show that the eternal problem of suffering innocence was raised by facts even in the old days, and in our days there are forms of well-being which are the natural fruits of well-doing. Still, the connection was closer in Judah than with us, and, in the case before us, the establishment of Jehoshaphat in the kingdom, his subjects' love, which showed itself in voluntary gifts over and above the taxes imposed, and his wealth and honour, were the direct results of his true religion.

A really devout man must be a propagandist. True faith cannot be hid nor be dumb. As certainly as light must radiate must faith strive to communicate itself.

So the account of Jehoshaphat's efforts to spread the worship of Jehovah follows the account of his personal godliness. 'His heart was lifted up in the ways of the Lord.' There are two kinds of lifted-up hearts; one when pride, self-sufficiency, and forgetfulness of God, raise a man to a giddy height, from which God's judgments are sure to cast him down and break him in the fall; one when a lowly heart is raised to high courage and devotion, and 'set on high,' because it fears God's name. Such elevation is consistent with humility. It fears no fall; it is an elevation above earthly desires and terrors, neither of which can reach it, so as to hinder the man from walking in 'the ways of the Lord.' This king was lifted to it by his happy experience of the blessed effects of obedience. These encouraged him to vigorous efforts to spread the religion which had thus gladdened and brightened his own life. Is that the use we make of the ease which God gives us?

Jehoshaphat had to destroy first, in order to build up. The 'high places and Asherim' had to be taken out of Judah before the true worship could be established there. So it is still. The Christian has to carry a sword in the one hand, and a trowel in the other. Many a rotten old building, the stones of which have been cemented in blood, has to be swept away before the fair temple can be reared. The Devil is in possession of much of the world, and the lawful owner has to dispossess the 'squatter.' No one can suppose that society is organised on Christian principles even in so-called 'Christian countries'; and there is much overturning work to be done before He whose right it is to reign is really king over the whole earth. We, too, have our 'high places and Asherim' to root out.

But that destructive work is not to be done by force.

Institutions can only be swept away when public opinion has grown to see their evils. Forcible reformations of manners, and, still more, of religion, never last, but are sure to be followed by violent rebounds to the old order. So, side by side with the removal of idolatry, this king took care to diffuse the knowledge of the true worship, by sending out a body of influential commissioners to teach in Judah. That was a new departure of great importance. It presents several interesting features. The composition of the staff of instructors is remarkable. The principal men in it are five court officers, next to whom, and subordinate, as is shown not only by the order of enumeration, but by the phrase 'with them,' were nine Levites, and, last and lowest of all, two priests. We might have expected that priests should be the most numerous and important members of such a body, and we are led to suspect that the priesthood was so corrupted as to be careless about religious reformation. A clerical order is not always the most ardent in religious revival. The commissioners were probably chosen, without regard to their being priests, Levites, or 'laymen,' because of their zeal in the worship of Jehovah; and the five 'princes' head the list in order to show the royal authority of the commission.

Another point is the emphasis with which their function of teaching is thrice mentioned in three verses. Apparently the bulk of the nation knew little or nothing of 'the law of the Lord,' either on its spiritual and moral or its ceremonial side; and Jehoshaphat's object was to effect an enlightened, not a forcible and superficial, change. God's way of influencing actions is to reveal Himself to the understanding and the heart, that these may move the will, and that may shape the

deeds. Wise men will imitate God's way. Jehoshaphat did not issue royal commands, but sent out teachers. In chapter xix. we find him despatching 'judges' in similar fashion throughout Judah. They had the power to punish, but these teachers had only authority to explain and to exhort.

The present writer accepts the chronicler's statement that the teachers had 'the Book of the Law' with them, though he recognises it as possible that that 'Book' was not identical with the complete collection of documents which now bears the name. But, be that as it may, the incident of our text is remarkable as being the only recorded systematic and complete attempt to diffuse the remedy against idolatry throughout the kingdom, as putting religious reformation on its only sure ground, and as hinting at deep and widespread ignorance among the masses.

'When a man's ways please the Lord, He maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him.' So Judah found. 'A terror of the Lord fell upon all the kingdoms' around. No doubt, the news filtered to them of how Jehovah was exerting His might on the nation, and a certain indefinable awe of this so potent god, who was defeating the Baalim, made them think that peace was the best policy. Each nation was supposed to have its own god, and the national god was supposed to fight for his worshippers; so that war was a struggle of deities as well as of men, and the stronger god won. Here was a god who had reconquered his territory, and had cast out usurpers. Prudence dictated keeping on good terms with him. But it never occurred to any of these peoples that their own gods were any less real than Judah's, or that Judah's God could ever become theirs.

AMASIAH

'Amasiah, the son of Zichri, who willingly offered himself unto the Lord.'—
1 CHRON. xvii. 16.

THIS is a scrap from the catalogue of Jehoshaphat's 'mighty men of valour'; and is Amasiah's sole record. We see him for a moment and hear his eulogium and then oblivion swallows him up. We do not know what it was that he did to earn it. But what a fate, to live to all generations by that one sentence!

I. Cheerful self-surrender the secret of all religion.

The words of our text contain a metaphor naturally drawn from the sacrificial system. It comes so easily to us that we scarcely recognise the metaphorical element, but the clear recognition of it gives great additional energy to the words. Amasiah was both sacrificer and sacrifice. His offering was self-immolation. As in all love, so in that noblest kind of it which clasps God, its perfect expression is, 'I give Thee my living, loving self.' Nor is it only sacrifice and sacrificer that are seen in deepest truth in the experience of the Christian life, but the reality of the Temple is also there, for 'Ye also . . . are built up a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices.' Only when God dwells in us, shall we have the nerve and the firmness of hand to take the knife and 'slay before the Lord,' the awful Guest in the sanctuary within, the most precious of the children of our spirits.

The essence of the sacrifice of self is the sacrifice of will. In the Christian experience 'willingly offered' is almost tautology, for unwilling offerings are a contradiction and in fact there are no such things. The

quality of unwillingness destroys the character of the offering and robs it of all sacredness. Reluctant Christianity is not Christianity. That noun and that adjective can never be buckled together.

The submission of will and the consequent surrender of myself and my powers, opportunities, and possessions, so that I do all, enjoy all, use all, and when need is, endure all with glad thankful reference to God is only possible to me in the measure in which my will is made flexible by love, and such will-subduing love comes only when we 'know and believe the love that God hath to us.' There is the point at which not a few moral and religious teachers go wrong and bewilder themselves and their disciples. There, too, is the point at which Christ and the Gospel of salvation through faith in Him stand forth as emancipating humanity from the dreary round of efforts and vain attempts to work up the condition needful for achieving the height of self-surrender, which is seen to be indispensable to all true nobleness of living, but is felt to be beyond the reach of the ordinary man. There, too, is the point at which many good people mar their lives as Christians. They waste their strength in trying to bring the jibbing horse up to the leap. They try to blow up a fire of devotion and to make themselves priests to offer themselves, but all the while the mutinous self recoils from the leap, and the fire burns smokily, and their sacrifice is laid on the altar with little joy, because they have not been careful and wise enough to begin at the beginning and to follow God's way of melting their wills, by love, the reflection of the Infinite love of God to them. God's priests offer themselves because they offer their wills; they offer their wills because they love God; they love God because they

know that God loves them. That is the divine order. It is vain to try to accomplish the end by any other.

II. This willing offering hallows all life.

No syllable is left to tell us what Amasiah did to win this praise. Probably the words enshrine some now forgotten memory of his cheerful courage, some heroic feat on an unrecorded battlefield. Particulars are not given nor needed. Specific actions are unimportant; the spirit of a life can be told with very incomplete details, and it, not the details, is the important thing. Sometimes, as in many modern biographies, one 'cannot see the wood for the trees,' and misses the main drift and aim of a life in the chaos of a bewildering mass of nothings. How much more happy the lot of this man of whom we have only the generalised expression of the text, unweighted and undisturbed by petty incidents! It takes tons of rose leaves to make a tiny phial of otto of roses, but the fragrance is far more pungent in a drop of the distillation than in armfuls of leaves. Every life shrinks into very small compass, and the centuries do not tolerate long biographies. Shall we not seek to order our life so that Amasiah's epitaph may serve for us? It will be blessed if this—and nothing else—is known about us, that we 'willingly offered ourselves to the Lord.' My friend! will that be a true epitome of your life?

III. This willing offering is accepted by God.

We may hear a mightier voice behind the chronicler's, and the judgment of the Judge of all pronounced by His lips. It matters little what men say of one another, but it matters everything what God says of us. We are but too apt to forget that He is now saying something as to each of us, and that we have not to wait

for death to put a final period to our activities, before our lives become fit subjects for God's judgment. Moment by moment we are writing our own sentences. But while it is good for us to remember the continuous judgment of God on each deed, it is not good to let dark thoughts of the principles of that judgment paralyse our activity or chill our confidence in His forgiving and accepting mercy. There is often a dark suspicion, like that of the one-talented servant, which blackens God's fair fame as being 'an austere Man,' making demands rather than imparting power, and the effect of such an ugly conception of Him is to cut the nerve of service and bury the talent, carefully folded up, it may be, but none the less earning nothing. 'If we call on Him as Father, who without respect of persons judgeth according to every man's work,' let us be sure that it will be a Fatherly judgment that He will pass upon us and our offerings. There is a wonderful collection on His altar of what many people would think rubbish, just as many a mother has laid away among her treasures some worthless article which her child had once given her—a weed plucked by the roadside in a long past summer day, some trifle of rare preciousness in the child's eyes, and of none in any others than her own. She opens her drawer and brings out the poor little thing, and her eyes fill and her heart fills as she looks. And does not God keep His children's gifts as lovingly, and set them in places of honour in the day when He 'makes up His jewels'? There are cups of cold water and widows' mites and much else that a supercilious world would call 'trash' stored there. Thank God! He accepts imperfect service, faltering faith, partial consecration, a little love. Even our poor offering may be an 'odour

of a sweet smell,' ministering fragrance that is a delight to Him, if it is offered with the much incense of the great Sacrifice and through the mediation of the great High Priest.

The world forgot Amasiah, or never knew him, an obscure soldier in an obscure kingdom, but God did not forget, and here is his epitaph, and this is his memorial to all generations. Men's chronicles have no room for all the names that their wearers are eager to have inscribed on their crumbling and crowded pages, 'but the Lamb's Book of Life' has ample space on its radiant pages for all who desire to set their names there, and if ours are there, we need not envy the proudest whose titles and deeds fill the most conspicuous pages in the world's records. 'Then shall every man have praise of Christ,' and he who wins that guerdon needs nothing more, and can have nothing more to swell his blessedness.

'A MIRROR FOR MAGISTRATES'

'And Jehoshaphat the king of Judah returned to his house in peace to Jerusalem. 2. And Jehu the son of Hanani the seer went out to meet him, and said to king Jehoshaphat, Shouldest thou help the ungodly, and love them that hate the Lord? therefore is wrath upon thee from before the Lord. 3. Nevertheless there are good things found in thee, in that thou hast taken away the groves out of the land, and hast prepared thine heart to seek God. 4. And Jehoshaphat dwelt at Jerusalem; and he went out again through the people from Beer-sheba to mount Ephraim, and brought them back unto the Lord God of their fathers. 5. And he set judges in the land throughout all the fenced cities of Judah, city by city, 6. And said to the judges, Take heed what ye do: for ye judge not for man, but for the Lord, who is with you in the judgment. 7. Wherefore now let the fear of the Lord be upon you; take heed and do it: for there is no iniquity with the Lord our God, nor respect of persons, nor taking of gifts. 8. Moreover in Jerusalem did Jehoshaphat set of the Levites, and of the priests, and of the chief of the fathers of Israel, for the judgment of the Lord, and for controversies, when they returned to Jerusalem. 9. And he charged them, saying, Thus shall ye do in the fear of the Lord, faithfully, and with a perfect heart. 10. And what cause soever shall come to you of your brethren that dwell in their cities, between blood and blood, between law and commandment, statutes and judgments, ye shall even warn them that they trespass not against the Lord, and so wrath come upon you, and upon your brethren: this do, and ye shall not trespass. 11. And

behold, Amariah the chief priest is over you in all matters of the Lord; and Zebadiah the son of Ishmael, the ruler of the house of Judah, for all the king's matters: also the Levites shall be officers before you. Deal courageously, and the Lord shall be with the good.'—2 CHRON. xix. 1-11.

JEHOSHAPHAT is distinguished by two measures for his people's good: one, his sending out travelling preachers through the land (2 Chron. xvii. 7-9); another, this provision of local judges and a central court in Jerusalem. The former was begun as early as the third year of his reign, but was probably interrupted, like other good things, by his ill-omened alliance with Ahab. The prophet Jehu's plain speaking seems to have brought the king back to his better self, and its fruit was his going 'among the people,' from south to north, as a missionary, 'to bring them back to Jehovah.' The religious reformation was accompanied by his setting judges throughout the land. Our modern way of distinguishing between religious and civil concerns is foreign to Eastern thought, and was especially out of the question in a theocracy. Jehovah was the King of Judah; therefore the things that are Caesar's and the things that are God's coalesced, and these two objects of Jehoshaphat's journeyings were pursued simultaneously. We have travelled far from his simple institutions, and our course has not been all progress. His supreme concern was to deal out even-handed justice between man and man; is not ours rather to give ample doses of law? To him the judicial function was a copy of God's, and its exercise a true act of worship, done in His fear, and modelled after His pattern. The first impression made in one of our courts is scarcely that judge and counsel are engaged in worship.

There had been local judges before Jehoshaphat—elders in the villages, the 'heads of the fathers' houses

in the tribes. We do not know whether the great secession had flung the simple old machinery somewhat out of gear, or whether Jehoshaphat's action was simply to systematise and make universal the existing arrangements. But what concerns us most is to note that all the charge which he gives to these peasant magistrates bears on the religious aspect of their duties. They are to think themselves as acting for Jehovah and with Jehovah. If they recognise the former, they may be confident of the latter. They are to 'let the fear of Jehovah be upon you,' for that awe resting on a spirit will, like a burden or water-jar on a woman's shoulder, make the carriage upright and the steps firm. They are not only to act for and with Jehovah, but to do like Him, avoiding injustice, favouritism, and corruption, the plague-spots of Eastern law-courts. In such a state of society, the cases to be adjudicated were mostly such as mother-wit, honesty and the fear of God could solve; other times call for other qualifications. But still, let us learn from this charge that even in our necessarily complicated legal systems and political life, there is room and sore need for the application of the same principles. What a different world it would be if our judges and representatives carried some tincture of Jehoshaphat's simple and devout wisdom into their duties! Civic and political life ought to be as holy as that of cloister and cell. To judge righteously, to vote honestly, is as much worship as to pray. A politician may be 'a priest of the Most High God.'

And for us all the spirit of Jehoshaphat's charge is binding, and every trivial and secular task is to be discharged for God, with God, in the fear of God. 'On the bells of the horses shall be Holiness unto Jehovah.'

If our religion does not drive the wheels of daily life, so much the worse for our life and our religion. But, above all, this charge reminds us that the secret of right living is to imitate God. These peasants were to find direction, as well as inspiration, in gazing on Jehovah's character, and trying to copy it. And we are to be 'imitators of God, as beloved children,' though our best efforts may only produce poor results. A masterpiece may be copied in some wretched little newspaper blotch, but the great artist will own it for a copy, and correct it into complete likeness.

The second step was to establish a 'supreme court' in Jerusalem, which had two divisions, ecclesiastical and civil, as we should say, the former presided over by the chief priest, and the latter by 'the ruler of the house of Judah.' Murder cases and the graver questions involving interpretation of the law were sent up thither, while the village judges had probably to decide only points that shrewdness and integrity could settle. But these superior judges, too, received charges as to moral, rather than intellectual or learned qualifications. Religiously, uprightly, 'with a perfect heart,' courageously, they were to act, 'and Jehovah be with the good!' That may be a prayer, like the old invocation with which heralds sent knights to tilt at each other, and with which, in some legal proceedings, the pleas are begun, 'God defend the right!' But more probably it is an assurance that God will guide the judges to favour the good cause, if they on their parts will bring the aforesaid qualities to their decisions. And are not these qualities just such as will, for the most part, give similar results to us, if in our various activities we exercise them? And may we not see a sequence worth our practically putting to the proof

In these characteristics enjoined on Jehoshaphat's supreme court? Begin with 'the fear of the Lord'; that will help us to 'faithfulness and a perfect heart'; and these again by taking away occasions of ignoble fear, and knitting together the else tremulous and distracted nature, will make the fearful brave and the weak strong.

But another thought is suggested by Jehoshaphat's language. Note how this court does not seem to have inflicted punishments, but to have had only counsels and warnings to wield. It was a board of conciliation rather than a penal tribunal. Two things it had to do—to press upon the parties the weighty consideration that crimes against men were sins against God, and that the criminal drew down wrath on the community. This remarkable provision brings out strongly thoughts that modern society will be the better for incorporating. The best way to deal with men is to get at their hearts and consciences. The deeper aspect of civil crimes or wrongs to men should be pressed on the doer; namely, that they are sins against God. Again, all such acts are sins against the mystical sacred bond of brotherhood. Again, the solidarity of a nation makes it inevitable that 'one sinner destroyeth much good,' and pulls down with him, when God smites him, a multitude of innocents. So finely woven is the web of the national life that, if a thread run in any part of it, a great rent gapes. If one member sins, all the members suffer with it. And lastly, the cruellest thing that we can do is to be dumb when we see sin being committed. It is not public men, judges and the like, alone, who are called on thus to warn evil-doers, but all of us in our degree. If we do not, we are guilty along with a

guilty nation; and it is only when, to the utmost of our power, we have warned our brethren as to national sins, that we can wash our hands in innocence. 'This do, and ye shall not be guilty.'

A STRANGE BATTLE

'We have no might against this great company that cometh against us; neither know we what to do: but our eyes are upon Thee.'—2 CHRON. xx. 12.

A FORMIDABLE combination of neighbouring nations, of which Moab and Ammon, the ancestral enemies of Judah, were the chief, was threatening Judah. Jehoshaphat, the king, was panic-stricken when he heard of the heavy war-cloud that was rolling on, ready to burst in thunder on his little kingdom. His first act was to muster the nation, not as a military levy but as suppliants, 'to seek help of the Lord.' The enemy was camping down by the banks of the Dead Sea, almost within striking distance of Jerusalem. It seemed a time for fighting, not for praying, but even at that critical moment, the king and the men, whom it might have appeared that plain duty called to arms, were gathered in the Temple, and, hampered by their wives and children, were praying. Would they not have done better if they had been sturdily marching through the wilderness of Judah to front their foes? Our text is the close and the climax of Jehoshaphat's prayer, and, as the event proved, it was the most powerful weapon that could have been employed, for the rest of the chapter tells the strangest story of a campaign that was ever written. No sword was drawn. The army was marshalled, but Levites with their instruments of music, not fighters with their spears, led the van, and

as 'they began to sing and to praise,' sudden panic laid hold on the invading force, who turned their arms against each other. So when Judah came to some rising ground, on which stood a watch-tower commanding a view over the savage grimness of 'the wilderness,' it saw a field of corpses, stark and stiff and silent. Three days were spent in securing the booty, and on the fourth, Jehoshaphat and his men 'assembled themselves in the Valley of Blessing,' and thence returned a joyous multitude praising God for the victory which had been won for them without their having struck a blow. The whole story may yield large lessons, seasonable at all times. We deal with it, rather than with the fragment of the narrative which we have taken as our text.

I. We see here the confidence of despair.

Jehoshaphat's prayer had stayed itself on God's self-revelation in history, and on His gift of the land to their fathers. It had pleaded that the enemy's hostility was a poor 'reward' for Israel's ancient forbearance, and now, with a burst of agony, it casts down before God, as it were, Judah's desperate plight as outnumbered by the swarm of invaders and brought to their last shifts—'we have no might against this great company . . . neither know we what to do.' But the very depth of despair sets them to climb to the height of trust. That is a mighty 'But,' which buckles into one sentence two such antitheses as confront us here. 'We know not what to do, but our eyes are upon Thee'—blessed is the desperation which catches at God's hand; firm is the trust which leaps from despair!

The helplessness is always a fact, though most of us manage to get along for the most part without discovering it. We are all outnumbered and overborne by

the claims, duties, hindrances, sorrows, and entanglements of life. He is not the wisest of men who, facing all that life may bring and take away, all that it must bring and take away, knows no quiver of nameless fear, but jauntily professes himself ready for all that life can inflict. But there come moments in every life when the false security in which shallow souls wrap themselves ignobly is broken up, and then often a paroxysm of terror or misery grips a man, for which he has no anodyne, and his despair is as unreasonable as his security. The meaning of all circumstances that force our helplessness on us is to open to us Jehoshaphat's refuge in his—'our eyes are upon Thee.' We need to be driven by the crowds of foes and dangers around to look upwards. Our props are struck away that we may cling to God. The tree has its lateral branches hewed off that it may shoot up heavenward. When the valley is filled with mist and swathed in evening gloom, it is the time to lift our gaze to the peaks that glow in perpetual sunshine. Wise and happy shall we be if the sense of helplessness begets in us the energy of a desperate faith. For these two, distrust of self and glad confidence in God, are not opposites, as naked distrust and trust are, but are complementary. He does not turn his eyes to God who has not turned them on himself, and seen there nothing to which to cling, nothing on which to lean. Astronomers tell us that there are double stars revolving round one axis and forming a unity, of which the one is black and the other brilliant. Self-distrust and trust in God are thus knit together and are really one.

II. We see here the peaceful assurance of victory that attends on faith.

A flash of inspiration came to one of the Levitical

singers who had, no doubt, been deeply moved and had unconsciously fitted himself for receiving it. Divinely breathed confidence illuminated his waiting spirit, and a great message of encouragement poured from his lips. His words heartened the host more than a hundred trumpets braying in their ears. How much one man who has drunk in God's assurance of victory can do to send a thrill of his own courage through more timorous hearts! Courage is no less contagious than panic. This Levite becomes the commander of the army, and Jehoshaphat and his captains 'bow their heads' and accept his plan for to-morrow, hearing in his ringing accents a message from Jehovah. The instructions given and at once accepted are as unlike those of ordinary warfare as is the whole incident; for there is to be no sword drawn nor blow struck, but they are to 'stand still and see the salvation of the Lord.' They are told where to find the enemy and are bid to go forth in order of battle against them, and they are assured 'that the battle is not theirs, but God's.' No wonder that the message was hailed as from heaven, and put new heart into the host, or that, when the messenger's voice ceased, his brother Levites broke into shrill praise as for a victory already won. With what calm, triumphant hearts the camp would sleep that night!

May we not take that inspired Levite's message as one to ourselves in the midst of our many conflicts both in the outward life and in the inward? If we have truly grasped God's hands, and are fighting for what is accordant with His will, we have a right to feel that 'the battle is not ours but God's,' and to be sure that therefore we shall conquer. Of course we are not to say to ourselves, 'God will fight for us, and we need

not strike a blow.' Jehoshaphat's example does not fit our case in that respect, and we may thank God that it does not. We have a better lot than to 'stand still and see the salvation of God,' for we are honoured by being allowed to share the stress of conflict and the glow of battle as well as in the shout of victory. But even in the struggles of outward life, and much more in those of our spiritual nature, every man who watches his own career will many a time have to recognise God's hand, unaided by any act of his own, striking for him and giving him victory; and in the spiritual life every Christian man knows that his best moments have come from the initiation of the Spirit who 'bloweth where He listeth.' How often we have been surprised by God's help; how often we have been quickened by God's inbreathed Spirit, and have been taught that the passivity of faith draws to us greater blessings than the activity of effort! 'They also serve who only stand and wait,' and they also conquer who in quietness and confidence keep themselves still and let God work for them and in them. The first great blessing of trust in God is that we may be at peace on the eve of battle, and the second is that in every battle it is, in truth, not we that fight, but God who fights for and in us.

III. We learn here the best preparation for the conflict.

When the morning dawned, the array was set in order and the march begun, and a strange array it was. In the van marched the Temple singers singing words that are music to us still: 'Give thanks unto the Lord, for His mercy endureth for ever,' and behind them came the ranks of Judah, no doubt swelling the volume of melody, that startled the wild creatures of the wilderness, and perhaps travelled through the still morning

as far as the camp of the enemy. The singers had no armour nor weapons. They were clad in 'the beauty of holiness,' the priestly dress, and for sword and spear they carried harps and timbrels. Our best weapons are like their equipment.

We are most likely to conquer if we lift up the voice of thanks for victory in advance, and go into the battle expecting to triumph, because we trust in God. The world's expectation of success is too often a dream, a will-o'-the-wisp that tempts to bogs where the beguiled victim is choked, though even in the world it is often true; 'screw your courage to the sticking point, and we'll not fail.' But faith, that is the expectation of success based on God's help and inspiring to struggles for things dear to His heart, is wont to fulfil itself, and by bringing God into the fray, to secure the victory. A thankful heart not seldom brings into existence that for which it is thankful.

IV. We see here the victory and the praise for it.

The panic that laid hold on the enemy, and turned their swords against each other, was more natural in an undisciplined horde such as these irregular levies of ancient times, than it would be in a modern army. Once started, the infection would spread, so we need not wonder that by the time that Judah arrived on the field all was over. How often a like experience attends us! We quiver with apprehension of troubles that never attack us. We dread some impending battle-field, and when we reach it, Jehoshaphat's surprise is repeated, 'and, behold they were dead bodies, fallen to the earth.' Delivered from foes and fears, Judah's first impulse was to secure the booty, for they were keen after wealth, and their 'faith' was not very pure or elevating. But their last act was worthier, and fitly

ended the strange campaign. They gathered in some wady among the grim cliffs of the wilderness of Judah, which broke the dreariness of that savage stretch of country with perhaps verdure and a brook, and there they 'blessed the Lord.' The chronicler gives a piece of popular etymology, in deriving the name, 'the valley of blessing,' from that morning's worship. Perhaps the name was older than that, and was given from a feeling of the contrast between the waste wilderness, which in its gaunt sterility seemed an accursed land, and the glen which with its trees and stream was indeed a 'valley of blessing.' If so, the name would be doubly appropriate after that day's experience. Be that as it may, here we have in vivid form the truth that all our struggles and fightings may end in a valley of blessing, which will ring with the praise of the God who fights for us. If we begin our warfare with an appeal to God, and with prayerful acknowledgment of our own impotence, we shall end it with thankful acknowledgment that we are 'more than conquerors through Him that loved us' and fought for us, and our choral song of praise will echo through the true Valley of Blessing, where no sound of enemies shall ever break the settled stillness, and the host of the redeemed, like that army of Judah, shall bear 'psalteries and harps and trumpets,' and shall need spear and sword no more at all for ever.

HOLDING FAST AND HELD FAST

'As they went forth Jehoshaphat stood and said, Believe in the Lord your God, so shall ye be established.'—2 CHRON. xx. 20.

CERTAINLY no stronger army ever went forth to victory than these Jews, who poured out of Jerusalem that

morning with no weapon in all their ranks, and having for their van, not their picked men, but singers who 'praised the beauty of holiness' and chanted the old hymn, 'Give thanks unto the Lord, for His mercy endureth for ever.' That was all that men had to do in the battle, for as the shrill song rose in the morning air 'the Lord set liers in wait for the foe,' and they turned their swords against one another, so that when Jehoshaphat and his troops came in sight of the enemy the battle was over and the field strewn with corpses—so great and swift is the power of devout recognition of God's goodness and trust in His enduring mercy, even in the hour of extremest peril.

The exhortation in our text which is Jehoshaphat's final word to his army, has, in the original, a beauty and emphasis that are incapable of being preserved in translation. There is a play of words which cannot be reproduced in another language, though the sentiment of it may be explained. The two expressions for 'believing' and 'being established' are two varying forms of the same root-word; and although we can only imitate the original clumsily in our language, we might translate in some such way as this: 'Hold fast by the Lord your God, and you will be held fast,' or 'stay yourselves on Him and you will be stable.' These attempts at reproducing the similarity of sound between the two verbs in the two clauses of our text, rude as they are, preserve what is lost, so far as regards form, in the English translation, though that is correct as to the meaning of the command and promise. If we note this connection of the two clauses we just come to the general principle which lies here, that the true source of steadfastness in character and conduct, of victory over temptation, and of standing fast in

slippery places, is simple reliance, or, to use the New Testament word, 'faith.' 'Believe and ye shall be established.' Put out your hand and clasp Him, and He puts out His hand and steadies you. But all the steadfastness and strength come from the mighty Hand that is outstretched, not from the tremulous one that grasps it.

So, then, keeping to the words of my text, let me suggest to you the large lessons that this saying teaches us, in regard to three things, which I may put as being the object, the nature, and the issues of faith; or, in other words, to whom we are to cling, how we are to cling, and what the consequence of the clinging is.

I. To whom we must cling.

'Stay yourselves on the Lord your God.' Well, then, faith is not believing a number of theological articles, nor is it even accepting the truth of the Gospel as it lies in Jesus Christ, but it is accepting the Christ whom the truth of the Gospel reveals to us. And, although we have to come to Him through the word that declares what He is, and what He has done for us, the act of believing on Him is something that lies beyond the mere understanding of, or giving credence to, the message that tells us who He is and what He has done. A man may have not the ghost of a doubt or hesitation about one tittle of revealed truth, and if you were to cross-question him, could answer satisfactorily all the questions of an orthodox inquisitor, and yet there may not be one faintest flicker of faith in that man's whole being, for all the correctness of his creed, and the comprehensiveness of it, too. Trust is more than assent. If it is a Person on whom our faith leans, then from that there follows clearly enough that the bond which binds us to Him must be something far warmer, far

deeper, and far more under the control of our own will than the mere consent or assent of our brains to a set of revealed truths. 'The Lord your God,' and not even the Bible that tells you about Him; 'the Lord your God,' and not even the revealed truths that manifest Him, but Him as revealed by the truths—it is He that is the Object to which our faith clings.

Jehoshaphat, in the same breath in which he exhorted his people to 'believe in the Lord, that they might be established,' also said, 'Believe His prophets, so shall ye prosper.' The immediate reference, of course, was to the man who the day before had assured them of victory. But the wider truth suggested is, that the only way to get to God is through the word that speaks of Him, and which has come from the lips either of prophets or of the Son who has spoken more, and more sweetly and clearly, than all the prophets put together. If we are to believe God, we must believe the prophets that tell us of Him.

And then there is another suggestion that may be made. The Object of faith proposed to Judah is not only 'the Lord,' but 'the Lord *your* God.' I do not say that there can be no faith without the 'appropriating' action which takes the whole Godhead for mine, but I doubt very much whether there is any. And it seems to me that to a very large extent the difference between mere nominal, formal Christians and men who really are living by the power of faith in God as revealed in Jesus Christ, lies in that one little word, 'the Lord *your* God.' That a man shall put out a grasping hand, and say, 'I take for my own—for my very own—the universal blessing, I claim as my possession that God of the spirits of all flesh, I believe that He does stand in a real individualising relation to me, and I to Him,' is

surely of the very essence of faith. There is no presumption, but the truest wisdom and lowliness in enclosing, if I may so say, a part of this great common for ours, and putting a hedge about it, as it were, and saying, 'That is mine.' We shall not have understood the sweetness and the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ until we have pointed and condensed the general declaration, 'He so loved the world,' into the individualising and appropriating one, 'He loved me, and gave Himself for me.' Oh! if we could only apply that process thoroughly to all the broad glorious words and promises of Scripture, and feel that the whole incidence of them was meant to fall upon us, one by one, and that just as the sun, up in the heavens there, sends all his beams into the tiniest daisy on the grass, as if there was nothing else in the whole world, but only its little petals to be smoothed out and opened, I think our Christianity would be more real, and we should have more blessings in our hands. God in Christ and I, the only two beings in the universe, and all His fullness mine, and all my weakness supported and supplemented by Him—that is the view that we should sometimes take. We should set ourselves apart from all mankind, and claim Him as our very own, and so be filled with the fullness of God.

This, then, is the Object of faith, a Person who is all mine and all yours too. The beam of light that falls on my eye falls on yours, and no man makes a sunbeam the smaller because he sees by it; and in like manner we may each possess the whole of God for our very own property.

II. How we cling.

The metaphor, I suppose, is more eloquent than all explanations of it. 'Believe in the Lord'; hold fast by

Him with a tight grip, continually renewed when it tends to slacken, as it surely will, and then you will be established.

We might run out into any number of figurative illustrations. Look at that little child beginning to learn to walk, how it fastens its little dimpled hands into its mother's apron, and so the tiny tottering feet get a kind of steadfastness into them. Look at that man lying at the door of the Temple, who never had walked since his mother's womb, and had lain there for forty years, with his poor weak ankles all atrophied by reason of their disuse. 'He *held* Peter and John.' Would not his grasp be tight? Would he not clasp their hands as his only stay? He had not become accustomed to the astounding miracle of walking, nor learned to balance himself and accomplish the still more astounding feat of standing steady. So he clutched at the two Apostles and was 'established.' Look at that man walking by a slippery path which he does not know, holding by the hand the guide who is able to direct and keep him up. See this other in some wild storm, with an arm round a steadfast tree-stem, to keep him from being blown over the precipice, how he clings like a limpet to a rock. And that is how we are to hold on to God, with what would be despair if it were not the perfection of confidence, with the clear sense that the only thing between us and ruin is the strong Hand that we clasp.

And what do we mean by clasping God? I mean making daily efforts to rivet our *love* on Him, and not to let the world, with all its delusive and cloying sweets, draw us away from Him. I mean continual and strenuous efforts to fix our *thoughts* upon Him, and not to allow the trivialities of life, or the claims of

culture, or the necessities of our daily position so to absorb our minds as that thoughts of God are comparative strangers there, except, perhaps, sometimes on a Sunday, and now and then at the sleepy end, or the half-awake beginning, of a day. I mean continually repeated and strenuous efforts to cleave to Him by the submission of our *will*, letting Him 'do what seemeth Him good,' and not lifting ourselves up against Him, or perking our own inclinations, desires, and fancies in His face, as if we would induce Him to take them for His guides! And I mean that we should try to commit our *way* unto the Lord, 'to rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him.' The submissive will which cleaves to God's commandments, the waiting heart that clings to His love, the regulated thoughts that embrace His truth, and the childlike confidence that commits its path to Him—these are the elements of that steadfast adherence to the Lord which shall not be in vain.

III. The blessed effects of this clinging to God.

'So shall ye be established.' That follows, as a matter of course. The only way to make light things stable is to fasten them to something that is stable. And the only way to put any kind of calmness and fixedness, and yet progress—stability in the midst of progress, and progress in the midst of stability—into our lives, is by keeping firm hold of God. If we grasp His hand, then a calm serenity will be ours. In the midst of changes, sorrows, losses, disappointments, we shall not be blown about here and there by furious winds of fortune, nor will the heavy currents of the river of life sweep us away. We shall have a holdfast and a mooring. And although, like some light-ship anchored in the Channel, we may heave up and down

with the waves, we shall keep in the same place, and be steadfast in the midst of mobility, and wholesomely mobile although anchored in the one spot where there is safety. As the issue of faith, of this throwing the responsibility for ourselves upon God, there will be quietness of heart, and continuance and persistence in righteousness, and steadfastness of purpose and continuity of advancement in the divine life. 'The law of the Lord is in his heart,' says one of the Psalms, 'none of his steps shall slide.' The man who walks holding God's hand can put down a firm foot, even when he is walking in slippery places. There will be decision, and strength, and persistence of continuous advance, in a life that derives its impulse and its motive power from communion with God in Jesus Christ.

There will be victory, not indeed after the fashion of that in this story before us. In it, of course, men had to do nothing but 'stand still and see the salvation of God.' That is the law for us, in regard to the initial blessings of acceptance, and forgiveness, and the communication of the divine life from above. We have to be simple recipients, and we have no co-operating share in that part of the work of our own salvation. But for the rest we have to help God. 'Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God that worketh in you.' But none the less, 'This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith,' and if we give heed to Jehoshaphat's commandment, and go out to battle as his people did, with the love and trust of God in our hearts, then we shall come back as they did, laden with spoil, and shall name the place which was the field of conflict 'the valley of blessing,' and return to Jerusalem 'with psalteries, and harps, and trumpets,' and 'God will give us rest from all our enemies round about us.'

JOASH

'And Joash did that which was right in the sight of the Lord all the days of Jehoiada the priest. . . . 17. Now after the death of Jehoiada came the princes of Judah, and made obeisance to the king. Then the king hearkened unto them. —2 CHRON. xxiv. 2, 17.

HERE we have the tragedy of a soul. Joash begins life well and for the greater part of it remains faithful to his conscience and to his duty, and then, when outward circumstances change, he casts all behind him, forgets the past and commits moral suicide. It is the sad old story, a bright commencement, an early promise all scattered to the winds. It is a strange story, too. This seven-year-old king had been saved when his father had been killed, and that true daughter of Jezebel, as well by nature as by blood, Athaliah, had murdered all his brothers and sisters, and made herself queen. He had been saved by the courage of a woman who might worthily stand by the side of Deborah and other Jewish heroines. By this woman, who was his aunt, he was hidden and brought up in the Temple until, whilst yet a mere boy, he came to the throne, the High Priest Jehoiada, the husband of his aunt, being his guardian during his nonage. He reigns well till the lad of seven becomes a mature man of thirty or thereabouts, and then Jehoiada dies, full of years and honours, and they fitly lay him among the kings of Judah, a worthy resting-place for one who had 'done good in Israel.' And now the weakling on the throne is left alone without the strong arm to guide him and keep him right, and we read that 'the princes of Judah came and made obeisance to him.' They take him on his weak side, and I dare say Jehoiada had been too true and too noble to do that, and though we are not told

what means they took to flatter and coax him, we see very plainly what they were conspiring to do, for we read that 'they left the house of the Lord their God, the God of their fathers, and served groves and idols,' the groves here mentioned being symbols of Ash-tarothe the goddess of the Sidonians. And so all the past is wiped out and Joash takes his place amongst the apostates. The story has solemn lessons.

I. Note the change from loyal adhesion to apostasy.

The strong man on whom Joash used to lean was away, and the poor, weak king went just where the wicked princes led him. It was probably out of sheer imbecility that he passed from the worship of God to the acknowledgment and service of idols.

The first point that I would insist upon is a well-worn and familiar one, as I am well aware, but I urge it upon you, and especially upon the younger portion of my audience. It is this, that there is no telling the amount of mischief that pure weakness of character may lead into. The worst men we come across in the Bible are not those who begin with a deliberate intention of doing evil. They are weak creatures, 'reeds shaken by the wind,' who have no power of resisting the force of circumstances. It is a truth which every one's experience confirms, that the mother of all possible badness is weakness, and that, not only as Milton's Satan puts it, 'To be weak is to be miserable,' but that weakness is wickedness sooner or later. The man who does not bar the doors and windows of his senses and his soul against temptation, is sure to make shipwreck of his life and in the end to become 'a fool.' There is so much wickedness lying round us in this world that any man who lets himself be shaped and coloured by that with which he comes in contact, is sure to go to the bad

in the long run. Where a man lays himself open to the accidents of time and circumstances, the majority of these influences will be contrary to what is right and good. Therefore, he must gather himself together and learn to say 'No!' There is no foretelling the profound abysses into which a 'good, easy' nature, with plenty of high and pure impulses, perhaps, but which are written in water, may fall. 'Thou, therefore, young man! be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.' Learn to say No! or else you will be sure to say Yes! in the wrong place, and then down you will go, like this Joash whose goodness depended on Jehoiada, and when *he* died, all the virtue that had characterised this life hitherto was laid with him in the dust.

Let us learn from this story in the next place, how little power of continuance there is in a merely traditional religion. Many of you call yourselves Christian people mainly because other people do the same. It is customary to respect and regard Christianity. You have been brought up in the midst of it. Our country is always considered a Christian land, and so, naturally, you tacitly accept the truth of a religion which is so influential. The lowest phase of this attitude is that which seeks some advantage from a church connection, like the foolish man in the Old Testament who thought he would do well because he had a Levite for his priest. Religion is the most personal thing about a man. To become a Christian is the most personal act one can perform. It is a thing that a man has to do for himself, and however friends and guides may help us in other matters, in trials and perplexities and difficulties, by their sympathy and experience, they are useless here. A man has here to act as if there were no other beings in the universe but a solitary God and himself,

and unless we have ourselves done that act in the depths of our own personality, we have not done it at all. If you young people are good, just because you have pious parents who make you go to church or chapel on a Sunday, and keep you out of mischief during the week, your goodness is a sham. One great result of personal Christianity is to make a minister, a teacher, a guide, superfluous, and when such an one becomes so, his work has been successful and not till then. Unless you put forth for yourself the hand of faith and for yourself yield up the devotion and love of your own heart, your religion is nought.

However much active effort about the outside of religion there may be, it is of itself useless. It is without bottom and without reality. Here we have Joash busy with the externals of worship and actually deceiving himself thereby. It was a great deal easier to make that chest for contributions to a Temple Repairing Fund, and to get it well filled, and to patch up the house of the Lord, than for him to get down on his knees and pray, and he may have thought that to be busy about the house of God was to be devout. So it may be with many Sunday-school teachers and Church workers. Their religion may be as merely superficial and as little personal as this man's was. It is not for me to say so about A, B, or C. It is for you to ask of yourselves if it is so as to you. But I do say that there is nothing that masks his own soul from a man more than setting him to do something for Christianity and God's Church, while in his inmost self he has not yet yielded himself to God.

I look around and I see the devil slaying his thousands by setting them to work in Christian associations and leaving them no time to think about their own

Christianity. My brother! if the cap fits, go home and put it on.

We see in Joash's life for how long a time a man may go on in this self-delusion of external and barren service and never know it. Joash came to the throne at the age of seven. Up till that age he had lived in the Temple in concealment. Until he was one and thirty he went on in a steady, upright course, never knowing that there was anything hollow in his life. Apparently, Jehoiada's long life of one hundred and thirty years extended over the greater part of Joash's reign, during most of which he had Jehoiada to direct him and keep him right, and all this tragedy comes at the fag end of it.

So he went on apparently all right, like a tree that has become quite hollow, till during some storm it is blown down and falls with a crash, and it is seen that for years it has been only the skin of a tree, bark outside, and inside—emptiness.

II. We come now to the second stage in the later life of Joash: His resistance to the divine pleading.

'And they left the house of the Lord God of their fathers, and served groves and idols, and wrath came upon Judah and Jerusalem for their trespass, yet He sent prophets to them to bring them again unto the Lord.' He sent with endless pity, with long-suffering patience. He would not be put away, and as they increased the distance between Him and them, He increased His energies to bring them back. But they lifted themselves up, Joash and his princes, and with that strange, awful power of resisting the attraction of the divine pleading, and hardening their hearts against the divine patience—'they would not.' And

then comes the affecting episode of the death of the high priest Zechariah, who had succeeded to his father's place and likewise to his heroism, and who, with the Spirit of God upon him, stands up and pointing out his wickedness, rebukes the fallen monarch for his apostasy. Joash, doubtless stung to the quick by Zechariah's just reproaches, allowed the truculent princes to slay him in the court of the Temple, even between the very shrine and the altar.

What a picture we have here of the divine love which follows every wanderer with its pleadings and beseechings! It came to this man through the lips of a prophet. It comes to us all in daily blessings, sometimes in messages, like these poor words of mine. God will not let us ruin ourselves without pleading with us and wooing us to love Him and cling to Him. 'He rises up early' and daily sends us His messages, sometimes rebukes and voices in our conscience, sometimes sunset glows and starry heavens lifting our thoughts above this low earth, sometimes sorrows that are meant to 'drive us to His breast,' and above all, the 'Gospel of our salvation' in Christ, ever, in such a land as ours, sounding in our ears.

Still further, we see in Joash what a strange, awful strength of obstinate resistance, a character weak as regards its resistance to man, can put forth against God. He never attempted to say 'No!' to the princes of Judah, but he could say it again and again to his Father in heaven. He could not but yield to the temptations which were level with his eyes, and this poor creature, easily swayed by human allurements and influences, could gather himself together, standing, as it were, on his little pin point, and say to God, 'Thou dost call and I refuse.' What a paradox, and yet repetitions

of it are sitting in these pews, only half aware that it is about them that I am speaking!

The ever-deepening evil which began with forsaking the house of the Lord and serving Ashtaroth, ends with Joash steeping his hands in blood. The murder of Zechariah was beyond the common count of crimes, for it was a foul desecration of the Temple, an act of the blackest ingratitude to the man who had saved his infant life, and put him on the throne, an outrage on the claims of family connections, for Joash and Zechariah were probably blood relations. My brother! once get your foot upon that steep incline of evil, once forsake the path of what is good and right and true, and you are very much like a climber who misses his footing up among the mountain peaks, and down he slides till he reaches the edge of the precipice and then in an instant is dashed to pieces at the bottom. Once put your foot on that slippery slope and you know not where you may fall to.

III. Last comes the final scene: The retribution.

We have that picture of Zechariah, solemnly lifting up his eyes to heaven and committing his cause to God. 'The Lord look upon it and require it,' says the martyr priest in the spirit of the old Law. The dying appeal was soon answered in the invasion of the Syrian army, a comparatively small company, into whose hands the Lord delivered a very great host of the Israelites. The defeat was complete, and possibly Joash's 'great diseases,' of which the narrative speaks, refer to wounds received in the fight. The end soon comes, for two of his servants, neither of them Hebrews, one being the son of an Ammonitess and the other the son of a Moabitess, who were truer to his religion than he had been, and resolved to revenge

Zechariah's death, entered the room of the wounded king in the fortress whither he had retired to hide himself after the fight, and 'slew him on his bed.' Imagine the grim scene—the two men stealing in, the sick man there on the bed helpless, the short ghastly struggle and the swift end. What an end for a life with such a beginning!

Now I am not going to dwell on this retribution, inflicted on Joash, or on that which comes to us if we are like him, through a loud-voiced conscience, and a memory which, though it may be dulled and hushed to sleep at present, is sure to wake some day here or yonder. But I beseech you to ask yourselves what your outlook is. 'Be not deceived, God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap.' Is that all? Zechariah said, 'The Lord look upon it and require it.' The great doctrine of retribution is true for ever. Yes; but our Zechariah lifts up his eyes to heaven and he says, 'Father! forgive them, for they know not what they do.' And so, dear brother! you and I, trusting to that dear Lord, may have all our apostasy forgiven, and be brought near by the blood of Christ. Let us say with the Apostle Peter, 'Lord, to whom shall we go but to Thee? Thou hast the words of eternal life.'

GLAD GIVERS AND FAITHFUL WORKERS

'And it came to pass after this, that Joash was minded to repair the house of the Lord. 5. And he gathered together the priests and the Levites, and said to them, go out unto the cities of Judah, and gather of all Israel money to repair the house of your God from year to year, and see that ye hasten the matter. Howbeit the Levites hastened it not. 6. And the king called for Jehoiada the chief, and said unto him, Why hast thou not required of the Levites to bring in out of Judah and out of Jerusalem the collection, according to the commandment of Moses the servant of the Lord, and of the congregation of Israel, for the tabernacle of witness? 7. For the sons of Athaliah, that wicked woman, had broken up the house of God:

and also all the dedicated things of the house of the Lord did they bestow upon Bealim. 8. And at the king's commandment they made a chest, and set it without at the gate of the house of the Lord. 9. And they made a proclamation through Judah and Jerusalem, to bring in to the Lord the collection that Moses the servant of God laid upon Israel in the wilderness. 10. And all the princes and all the people rejoiced, and brought in, and cast into the chest, until they had made an end. 11. Now it came to pass, that at what time the chest was brought unto the king's office by the hand of the Levites, and when they saw that there was much money, the king's scribe and the high priest's officer came and emptied the chest, and took it, and carried it to his place again. Thus they did day by day, and gathered money in abundance. 12. And the king and Jehoiada gave it to such as did the work of the service of the house of the Lord, and hired masons and carpenters to repair the house of the Lord, and also such as wrought iron and brass to mend the house of the Lord. 13. So the workmen wrought, and the work was perfected by them, and they set the house of God in his state, and strengthened it. 14. And when they had finished it, they brought the rest of the money before the king and Jehoiada, whereof were made vessels for the house of the Lord, even vessels to minister, and to offer withal, and spoons, and vessels of gold and silver. And they offered burnt offerings in the house of the Lord continually all the days of Jehoiada.'—2 CHRON. xxiv. 4-14.

JOASH owed his life and his throne to the high-priest Jehoiada, who was his uncle by marriage with the sister of Ahaziah, his father. Rescued by his aunt when an infant, he 'was with them, hid in the house of God six years,' and, when seven years old, was made king by Jehoiada's daring revolt against 'that wicked woman, Athaliah. Jehoiada's influence was naturally paramount, and was as wholesome as strong. It is remarkable, however, that this impulse to repair the Temple seems to have originated with the king, not with the high-priest, though no doubt the spirit which conceived the impulse was largely moulded by the latter. The king, whose childhood had found a safe asylum in the Temple, might well desire its restoration, even apart from considerations of religion.

I. The story first brings into strong contrast the eager king, full of his purpose, and the sluggards to whom he had to entrust its execution. We can only guess the point in his reign at which Joash summoned the priests to his help. It was after his marriage (ver. 3), and considerably before the twenty-third year of his reign, at which time his patience was

exhausted (2 Kings xii. 6). Some years were apparently wasted by the dawdling sluggishness of the priests, who, for some reason or other, did not go into the proposed restoration heartily. Joash seems to have suspected that they would push the work languidly; for there is a distinct tinge of suspicion and 'whipping up' in his injunction to 'hasten the matter.'

The first intention was to raise the funds by sending out the priests and Levites to collect locally the statutory half-shekel, as well as other contributions mentioned in 2 Kings xii. There we learn that each collector was to go to 'his acquaintance.' The subscription was to be spread over some years, and for a while Joash waited quietly; but in the twenty-third year of his reign (see 2 Kings), he could stand delay no longer. Whether the priests had been diligent in collecting or not, they had done nothing towards repairing. Perhaps they found it difficult to determine the proportion of the money which was needed for the ordinary expenses of worship, and for the restoration fund; and, as the former included their own dues and support, they would not be likely to set it down too low. Perhaps they did not much care to carry out a scheme which had not begun with themselves; for priests are not usually eager to promote ecclesiastical renovations suggested by laymen. Perhaps they did not care as much about the renovation as the king did, and smiled at his earnestness as a pious imagining. Possibly there was even deliberate embezzlement. But, at any rate, there was half-heartedness, and that always means languid work, and that always means failure. The earnest people are fretted continually by the indifferent. Every good scheme is held back, like a ship with a foul bottom, by the barnacles that stick

to its keel and bring down its speed. Professional ecclesiastics in all ages have succumbed to the temptation of thinking that 'church property' was first of all to be used for their advantage, and, secondarily, for behoof of God's house. Eager zeal has in all ages to be yoked to torpid indifference, and to drag its unwilling companion along, like two dogs in a leash. Direct opposition is easier to bear than apparent assistance which tries to slow down to half speed.

Joash's command is imperative on all workers for God. 'See that ye hasten the matter,' for time is short, the fruit great, the evening shadows lengthening, the interests at stake all-important, and the Lord of the harvest will soon come to count our sheaves. Whatever work may be done without haste, God's cannot be, and a heavy curse falls on him who 'does the work of the Lord negligently.' The runner who keeps well on this side of fatigue, panting, and sweat, has little chance of the crown.

II. The next step is the withdrawal of the work from the sluggards. They are relieved both of the collection and expenditure of the money. Apparently (2 Kings xii. 9) the contributors handed their donations to the door-keepers, who put them into the chest with 'a hole in the lid of it,' in the sight of the donors. The arrangement was not flattering to the hierarchy, but as appearances were saved by Jehoiada's making the chest (see 2 Kings) they had to submit with the best grace they could. In our own times, we have seen the same thing often enough. When clergy have maladministered church property, Parliament has appointed ecclesiastical commissioners. Common sense prescribes taking slovenly work out of lazy hands. The more rigidly that principle is carried out in the

church and the nation, at whatever cost of individual humiliation, the better for both. 'The tools to the hands that can use them' is the ideal for both. God's dealings follow the same law, both in withdrawing opportunities of service and in giving more of such. The reward for work is more work, and the punishment for sloth is compulsory idleness.

III. We are next shown the glad givers. Probably suspicion had been excited in others than the king, and had checked liberality. People will not give freely if the expenses of the collectors' support swallow up the funds. It is hard to get help for a vague scheme, which unites two objects, and only gives the balance after the first is provided for, to the second and more important. So the whole nation, both high and low, was glad when the new arrangement brought a clear issue, and secured the right appropriation of the money.

No doubt, too, Joash's earnestness kindled others. Chronicles speaks only of the 'tax,'—that is, the half-shekel,—but Kings mentions two other sources, one of which is purely spontaneous gifts, and these are implied by the tone of verse 10, which lays stress on the gladness of the offerers. That is the incense which adds fragrance to our gifts. Grudging service is no service, and money given for ever so religious a purpose, without gladness because of the opportunity of giving, is not, in the deepest sense, given at all. Love is a longing to give to the beloved, and whoever truly loves God will know no keener delight than surrender for His dear sake. Pecuniary contributions for religious purposes afford a rough but real test of the depth of a man's religion; but it is one available only for himself, since the motive, and not the amount, is the determin-

ing element. We all need to bring our hearts more under the influence of God's love to us, that our love to Him may be increased, and then to administer possessions, under the impulse to glad giving which enkindled love will always excite. Super-heated steam has most expansive power and driving force. These glad givers may remind us not only of the one condition of acceptable giving, but also of the need for clear and worthy objects, and of obvious disinterestedness in those who seek for money to help good causes. The smallest opening for suspicion that some of it sticks to the collector's fingers is fatal, as it should be.

IV. Joash was evidently a business-like king. We next hear of the precautions he took to secure the public confidence. There was a rough but sufficient audit. When the chest grew heavy, and sounded full, two officials received it at the 'king's office.' The Levites carried it there, but were not allowed to handle the contents. The two tellers represented the king and the chief priest, and thus both the civil and religious authorities were satisfied, and each officer was a check on the other. Public money should never be handled by a man alone; and an honest one will always wish, like Paul, to have a brother associated with him, that no man may blame him in his administration of it. If we take 'day by day' literally, we have a measure of the liberality which filled the chest daily; but, more probably, the expression simply means 'from time to time,' when occasion required.

V. The application of the money is next narrated. In this Jehoiada is associated with Joash, the king probably desiring to smooth over any slight that might seem to have been put on the priests, as well as being still under the influence of the high-priest's strong

character and early kindness. Together they passed over the results of the contribution to the contractors, who in turn paid it in wages to the workmen who repaired the fabric, such as masons and carpenters, and to other artisans who restored other details, such as brass and iron work. The Second Book of Kings tells us that Joash's cautious provision against misappropriation seems to have deserted him at this stage; for no account was required of the workmen, 'for they dealt faithfully.' That is an indication of their goodwill. The humble craftsmen were more reliable than the priests. They had, no doubt, given their half-shekel like others, and now they gladly gave their work, and were not hirelings, though they were hired. We, too, have to give our money and our labour; and if our hearts are right, we shall give both with the same conscientious cheerfulness, and, if we are paid in coin for our work, will still do it for higher reasons and looking for other wages. These Temple workmen may stand as patterns of what religion should do for those of us whose lot is to work with our hands,—and not less for others who have to toil with their brains, and the sweat of whose brow is inside their heads. A Christian workman should be a 'faithful' workman, and will be so if he is full of faith.

Joash knew when to trust and when to keep a sharp eye on men. His experience with the priests had not soured him into suspecting everybody. Cynical disbelief in honesty is more foolish and hurtful to ourselves than even excessive trust. These workmen wrought all the more faithfully because they knew that they were trusted, and in nine cases out of ten men will try to live up to our valuation of them. The Rugby boys used to say, 'It's a shame to tell Arnold a lie, he always believes

us.' Better to be cheated once than to treat the nine as rogues,—better for them and better for ourselves.

'Faithful' work is prosperous work. As verse 13 picturesquely says, 'Healing went up upon the work'; and the Temple was restored to its old fair proportions, and stood strong as before. Where there is conscientious effort, God's blessing is not withheld. Labour 'in the Lord' can never be empty labour, though even a prophet may often be tempted, in a moment of weary despondency, to complain, 'I have laboured in vain.' We may not see the results, nor have the workmen's joy of beholding the building rise, course by course, under our hands, but we shall see it one day, though now we have to work in the dark.

There seems a discrepancy between the statements in Chronicles and Kings as to the source from which the cost of the sacrificial vessels was defrayed, since, according to the former, it was from the restoration fund, which is expressly denied by the latter. The explanation seems reasonable, that, as Chronicles says, it was from the balance remaining after all restoration charges were liquidated, that this other expenditure was met. First, the whole amount was sacredly devoted to the purpose for which it had been asked, and then, when the honest overseers repaid the uncounted surplus, which they might have kept, it was found sufficient to meet the extra cost of furnishing. God blesses the faithful steward of his gifts with more than enough for the immediate service, and the best use of the surplus is to do more with it for Him. 'God is able to make all grace abound unto you; that ye, having always all sufficiency in every thing, may abound unto every good work, . . . being enriched in every thing unto all liberality.'

PRUDENCE AND FAITH

'And Amaziah said to the man of God, But what shall we do for the hundred talents which I have given to the army of Israel? And the man of God answered, The Lord is able to give thee much more than this.'—2 CHRON. xxiv. 9.

THE character of this Amaziah, one of the Kings of Judah, is summed up by the chronicler in a damning epigram: 'He did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, but not with a perfect heart.' He was one of your half-and-half people, or, as Hosea says, 'a cake not turned,' burnt black on one side, and raw dough on the other. So when he came to the throne, in the buoyancy and insolence of youth, he immediately began to aim at conquests in the neighbouring little states; and in order to strengthen himself he hired 'a hundred thousand mighty men of valour' out of Israel for a hundred talents of silver. To seek help from Israel was, in a prophet's eyes, equivalent to flinging off help from God. So a man of God comes to him, and warns him that the Lord is not with Israel, and that the alliance is not permissible for him. But, instead of yielding to the prophet's advice, he parries it with this misplaced question, 'But what shall we do for the hundred talents that I have given to the army of Israel?' He does not care to ask whether the counsel that he is receiving is right or wrong, or whether what he is intending to do is in conformity with, or in opposition to, the will of God, but, passing by all such questions, at once he fastens on the lower consideration of expediency—'What is to become of me if I do as this prophet would have me do? What a heavy loss one hundred talents will be! It is too much to sacrifice to a scruple of that sort. It cannot be done.'

A great many of us may take a lesson from this man. There are two things in my text—a misplaced question and a triumphant answer: ‘What shall we do for the hundred talents?’ ‘The Lord is able to give thee much more than this.’ Now, remarkably enough, both question and answer may be either very right or very wrong, according as they are taken, and I purpose to look at those two aspects of each.

I. A misplaced question.

I call it misplaced because Amaziah’s fault, and the fault of a great many of us, was, not that he took consequences into account, but that he took them into account at the wrong time. The question should have come second, not first. Amaziah’s first business should have been to see clearly what was duty; and then, and not till then, the next business should have been to consider consequences.

Consider the right place and way of putting this question. Many of us make shipwreck of our lives because, with our eyes shut, we determine upon some grand design, and fall under the condemnation of the man that ‘began to build, and was not able to finish.’ He drew a great plan of a stately mansion; and then found that he had neither money in the bank, nor stones in his quarry, to finish it, and so it stood—a ruin. All through our Lord’s life He was engaged rather in repressing volunteers than in soliciting recruits, and He from time to time poured a douche of cold water upon swiftly effervescing desires to go after Him. When the multitudes followed Him, He turned and said to them, ‘If you are counting on being My disciples, understand what it means: take up the cross and follow Me.’ When an enthusiastic man, who had not looked consequences in the face, came rushing to

Him and said: 'Lord, I will follow Thee whithersoever Thou goest,' His answer to him was another pull at the string of the shower bath: 'The Son of Man hath not where to lay His head.' When the two disciples came to Him and said: 'Grant that we may sit, the one on Thy right hand and the other on Thy left, when Thou comest into Thy kingdom,' He said: 'Are ye able to drink of the cup that I drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized withal?' Look the facts in the face before you make your election. Jesus Christ will enlist no man under false pretences. Recruiting-sergeants tell country bumpkins or city louts wonderful stories of what they will get if they take the shilling and put on the king's uniform; but Jesus Christ does not recruit His soldiers in that fashion. If a man does not open his eyes to a clear vision of the consequences of his actions, his life will go to water in all directions. And there is no region in which such clear insight into what is going to follow upon my determinations and the part that I take is more necessary than in the Christian life. It is just because in certain types of character, 'the word is received with joy,' and springs up immediately, that when 'the sun is risen with a burning heat'—that is, as Christ explains, when the pinch of difficulty comes—'immediately they fall away,' and all their grand resolutions go to nothing. 'Lightly come, lightly go.' Let us face the facts of what is involved, in the way of sacrifice, surrender, loss, if we determine to be on Christ's side; and then, when the anticipated difficulties come, we shall neither be perplexed nor swept away, but be able quietly to say, 'I discounted it all beforehand; I knew it was coming.' The storm catches the ship that is carrying full sail and expecting nothing

but light and favourable breezes; while the captain that looked into the weather quarter and saw the black cloud beginning to rise above the horizon, and took in his sails and made his vessel snug and tight, rides out the gale. It is wisdom that becomes a man, to ask this question, if first of all he has asked, 'What ought I to do?'

But we have here an instance of a right thing in a wrong place. It was right to ask the question, but wrong to ask it at that point. Amaziah thought nothing about duty. There sprang up in his mind at once the cowardly and ignoble thought: 'I cannot afford to do what is right, because it will cost me a hundred talents,' and that was his sin. Consequences may be, must be, faced in anticipation, or a man is a fool. He that allows the clearest perception of disagreeable consequences, such as pain, loss of ease, loss of reputation, loss of money, or any other harmful results that may follow, to frighten him out of the road that he knows he ought to take, is a worse fool still, for he is a coward and recreant to his own conscience.

We have to look into our own hearts for the most solemn and pressing illustrations of this sin, and I daresay we all of us can remember clear duties that we have neglected, because we did not like to face what would come from them. A man in business will say, 'I cannot afford to have such a high standard of morality; I shall be hopelessly run over in the race with my competitors if I do not do as they do,' or he will say, 'I durst not take a stand as an out-and-out Christian; I shall lose connections, I shall lose position. People will laugh at me. What am I to do for the hundred talents?'

But we can find the same thing in Churches. I do not mean to enter upon controversial questions, but as an instance, I may remind you that one great argument that our friends who believe in an Established Church are always bringing forward, is just a modern form of Amaziah's question, 'What shall we do for the hundred talents? How could the Church be maintained, how could its ministrations be continued, if its State-provided revenues were withdrawn or given up?' But it is not only Anglicans who put the consideration of the consequences of obedience in the wrong place. All the Churches are but too apt to let their eyes wander from reading the plain precepts of the New Testament to looking for the damaging results to be expected from keeping them. Do we not sometimes hear, as answer to would-be reformers, 'We cannot afford to give up this, that, or the other practice? We should not be able to hold our ground, unless we did so-and-so and so-and-so.'

But not only individuals or Churches are guilty in this matter. The nation takes a leaf out of Amaziah's book, and puts aside many plain duties, for no better reason than that it would cost too much to do them. 'What is the use of talking about suppressing the liquor traffic or housing the poor? Think of the cost.' The 'hundred talents' block the way and bribe the national conscience. For instance, the opium traffic; how is it defended? Some attempt is made to prove either that we did not force it upon China, or that the talk about the evils of opium is missionary fanaticism, but the sheet-anchor is: 'How are we ever to raise the Indian revenue if we give up the traffic?' That is exactly Amaziah over again, come from the dead, and resurrected in a very ugly shape.

So national policy and Church action, and—what is of far more importance to you and me than either the one or the other,—our own personal relation to Jesus Christ and discipleship to Him, have been hampered, and are being hampered, just by that persistent and unworthy attitude of looking at the consequences of doing plain duties, and permitting ourselves to be frightened from the duties because the consequences are unwelcome to us.

Prudence is all right, but when prudence takes command and presumes to guide conscience, then it is all wrong. In some courts of law and in certain cases, the judge has an assessor sitting beside him, an expert about some of the questions that are involved. Conscience is the judge, prudence the assessor. But if the assessor ventures up on the judgment-seat, and begins to give the decisions which it is not his business to give—for *his* only business is to give advice—then the only thing to do with the assessor is to tell him to hold his tongue and let the judge speak. It is no answer to the prophet's prohibition to say, 'But what shall I do for the hundred talents?' A yet better answer than the prophet gave Amaziah would have been, 'Never mind about the hundred talents; do what is right, and leave the rest to God.' However, that was not the answer.

II. The triumphant answer.

'The Lord is able to give thee much more than this.' Now, this answer, like the question, may be right or wrong, according as it is taken. In what aspect is it wrong? In what sense is it not true? I suppose this prophet did not mean more than the undeniable truth that God was able to give Amaziah more than a hundred talents. He was not thinking

of the loftier meanings which we necessarily, as Christian people, at a later stage of Revelation, and with a clearer vision of many things, attach to the words. He simply meant, 'You will very likely get more than the hundred talents that you have lost, if you do what pleases God.' He was speaking from the point of view of the Old Testament; though even in the Old Testament we have instances enough that prosperity did not always attend righteousness. In the Old Testament we find the Book of Job, and the Book of Ecclesiastes, and many a psalm, all of which were written in order to grapple with the question, 'How is it that God does *not* give the good man more than the hundred talents that he has lost for the sake of being good?' It is not true, and it is a dangerous mistake to suggest that it is true, that a man in this world never loses by being a good, honest, consistent Christian. He often does lose a great deal, as far as this world is concerned; and he has to make up his mind to lose it, and it would be a very poor thing to say to him, 'Now, live like a Christian man, and if you are flinging away money or anything else because of your Christianity, you will get it back.' No; you will not, in a good many cases. Sometimes you will, and sometimes you will not. It does not matter whether you do or do not.

But the sense in which the triumphant answer of the prophet is true is a far higher one. 'The Lord is able to give thee much more than this,'—what is 'more'? a thousand talents? No; the 'much more' that Christianity has educated us to understand is meant in the depths of such a promise as this is, first of all, character. Every man that sacrifices anything to convictions of duty gains more than he loses thereby,

because he gains in inward nobleness and strength, to say nothing of the genial warmth of an approving conscience. And whilst that is true in all regions of life, it is most especially true in regard to sacrifices made from Christian principle. No matter how disastrous may be the results externally, the inward results of faithfulness are so much greater and sweeter and nobler than all the external evil consequences that may follow, that it is 'good policy' for a man to beggar himself for Christ's sake, for the sake of the durable riches—which our Lord Himself explains to be synonymous with righteousness—which will come thereby. He that wins strength and Christ-likeness of character by sacrificing for Christ has won far more than he can ever lose.

He wins not only character, but a fuller capacity for a fuller possession of Jesus Christ Himself, and that is infinitely more than anything that any man has ever sacrificed for the sake of that dear Lord. Do you remember when it was that there was granted to the Apostle John the vision of the throned Christ, and that he felt laid upon him the touch of the vivifying Hand from Heaven? It was 'when I was in Patmos for the Word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus.' He lost Ephesus; he gained an open heaven and a visible Christ. Do you remember who it was that said, 'I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ'? It was a good bargain, Paul! The balance-sheet showed a heavy balance to your credit. Debit, 'all things'; credit, 'Christ.' 'The Lord is able to give thee much more than this.'

Remember the old prophecy: 'For brass I will bring gold; and for iron, silver.' The brass and the iron

may be worth something, but if we barter them away and get instead gold and silver, we are gainers by the transaction. Fling out the ballast if you wish the balloon to rise. Let the hundred talents go if you wish to get 'the more than this.' And listen to the New Testament variation of this man of God's promise, 'If thou wilt have treasure in heaven, go and sell all that thou hast, and follow Me.'

JOTHAM

'So Jotham became mighty, because he prepared his ways before the Lord his God.'—2 CHRON. xxvii. 6.

THIS King Jotham is one of the obscurer of the Jewish monarchs, and we know next to nothing about him. The most memorable event in his reign is that 'in the year when King Uzziah,' his father, 'died,' and consequently in Jotham's first year, Isaiah saw the Lord sitting in the Temple on the empty throne, and had the lips which were to utter so many immortal words touched with fire from the altar. Whether it were the effect of the prophet's words, or from other causes, the little that is told of him is good, and he is eulogised as having imitated his father's God-pleasing acts, and not having stained himself by repeating his father's sin. The rest that we hear of him in Chronicles is a mere sketch of campaigns, buildings, and victories, and then he and his reign are summed up in the words of our text, which is the analysis of the man and the disclosure of the secret of his prosperity: 'He became mighty, because he prepared his ways'—and, more than that, 'he prepared them before the Lord his God.'

So then, if we begin, as it were, at the bottom, as we ought to do, in studying a character, taking the deepest

thing first, and laying hold upon the seminal and germinal principle of the whole, this text reminds us that—The secret of true strength lies in the continual recognition that life is lived ‘Before the Lord our God.’

Now to say, ‘Walk thou *before* Me,’ the command given to Abraham, suggests a somewhat different modification of the idea from the apparently parallel phrase, ‘to walk *with* God,’ which is declared to have been the life’s habit of Enoch. The one expression suggests simple companionship and communion; the other suggests rather the vivid and continual realisation of the thought that we are ‘ever in the great Taskmaster’s eye.’ To walk before God is to feel thrillingly and continually, and yet without being abased or crushed or discomposed, but rather being encouraged and quickened and calmed and ennobled and gladdened thereby: ‘Thou God seest me.’ It seems to me that one of the plainest pieces of Christian duty, and, alas! one of the most neglected of them, is the cultivation, definitely and consciously, by effort and by self-discipline, of that consciousness as a present factor in all our lives, and an influencing motive in everything that we do. If once we could bring before the eye of our minds that great, blazing, white throne, and Him that sits upon it, we should want nothing else to burn up the commonplaces of life, and to flash its insignificance into splendour and awfulness. We should want nothing else to lift us to a ‘solemn scorn of ills,’ and to deliver us from the false sweetnesss and fading delights that grow on the low levels of a sense-bound life! Brethren! our whole life would be transformed and glorified, and we should be different men and women if we ordered our ways as ‘*before the Lord our*

God. What meanness could live when we knew that it was seen by those pure Eyes? How we should be ashamed of ourselves, of our complaints, of our murmurings, of our reluctance to do our duty, of our puerile regrets for vanished blessings, and of all the low cares and desires that beset and spoil our lives, if once this thought, 'before God,' were habitual with us, and we walked in it as in an atmosphere!

Why is it not? and might it not be? and if it might not, ought it not to be? And what are we to say to Him whom we profess to love as our Supreme Good, if all the day long the thought of Him seldom comes into our minds, and if any triviality, held near the eye, is large enough and bright enough to shut Him out from our sight? With deep ethical significance and accuracy was the command given to Abraham as the sole, all-sufficient direction for both inward and outward life: 'Walk before Me and (so) be thou perfect.' For indeed the full realisation—adequate and constant and solid enough to be a motive—of 'Thou God seest me,' would be found to contain practical directions in regard to all moral difficulties, and would unfailingly detect the evil, howsoever wrapped up, and would carry in itself not only motive but impulse, not only law but power to fulfil it. The Master's eye makes diligent servants. How schoolboys bend themselves over their slates and quicken their effort when the teacher is walking behind the benches! And how a gang of idle labourers will buckle to the spade and tax their muscles in an altogether different fashion when the overseer appears upon the field! If we realised, as we should do, the presence in all our little daily life of that great, sovereign Lord, there would be less skulking, less superficially performed tasks, less jerry work put into our

building; more of our strength cast into all our work, and less of ourselves in any of it.

Remember, too, how connected with this is another piece of effort needful in the religious life, and suggested by the last words of this text, 'Before the Lord *his* God.' Cultivate the habit of narrowing down the general truths of religion to their relation to yourselves. Do not be content with 'the Lord *our* God,' or 'the Lord the God of the whole earth,' but put a 'my' in, and realise not only the presence of a divine Inspector, but the closeness of the personal bond that unites to Him; and the individual responsibility, in all its width and depth and unshiftness—if I may use such a word—which results therefrom. You cannot shake off or step out of the tasks that 'the Lord *your* God' lays upon you. You and He are as if alone in the world. Make Him your God by choice, by your own personal acceptance of His authority and dependence upon His power, and try to translate into daily life the great truth, 'Thou God seest *me*,' and bring it to bear upon the veriest trifles and smallest details.

Now the text follows the order of observation, so to speak, and mentions the outward facts of Jotham's success before it goes deeper and accounts for them. We have reversed the process and dealt first with the cause. The spring of all lay in his conscious recognition of his relation to God and God's to him. From that, of course, followed that he 'prepared,' according to the Authorised Version, or 'ordered,' according to the Revised Version, 'his ways.' There is an alternative rendering of the word rendered 'prepared' or 'ordered' given in the margin of the Authorised Version, which reads, 'established his ways.' Both the ideas of ordering and establishing are contained in the word.

Now that fact, that the same word means both these, conveys a piece of practical wisdom, which it will do us all good to note clearly and take to heart. For it teaches us that whatever is 'ordered' is firm, and whatever is disorderly, haphazard, done without the exercise of one's mind on the act, being chaotic, is necessarily short-lived.

The ordered life is the established life. The life of impulse, chance, passion, the life that is lived without choice and plan, without reflection and consideration of consequences, the following of nature, which some people tell us is the highest law, and which is wofully likely to degenerate into following the *lower* nature, which ought not to be followed, but covered and kept under hatches—such a life is sure to be a topsy-turvy life, which, being based upon the narrowest point, must, by the laws of equilibrium, topple over sooner or later. If you would have your lives established, they must be ordered. You must bring your brains to bear upon them, and you must bring more than brain, you must bring to bear on every part of them the spiritual instincts that are quickened by contact with the thought of the All-seeing God, and let these have the ordering of them. Such lives, and only such, will endure 'when all that seems shall suffer shock.' 'He that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.'

But the lesson that is pressed upon us by this word, understood in the other meanings of 'prepared' or 'ordered,' is that all our 'ways,' that is, our practical life, our acts, direction of mind, habits, should be regulated by continual consciousness of, and reference to, the All-discerning Eye that looks down upon us, and 'the God in whose hands our breath is, and whose are'—whether we make them so or not—'all our ways.' To

translate that into less picturesque, and less forcible, but more modern words, it is just this: You Christian people ought to make it a point of duty to cultivate the habit of referring everything that you do to the will and judgment of God. Take Him into account in everything great or small, and in nothing say, 'Thus I will, thus I command. My will shall stand instead of all other reasons'; but say, 'Lord! by Thee and for Thee I try to do this'; and having done it, say, 'Lord! the seed is sown in Thy name; bless Thou the springing thereof.' Works thus begun, continued and ended, will never be put to confusion, and 'ways' thus ordered will be established. A path of righteousness like that can no more fail to be a way of peace than can God's throne ever totter or fall. An ordered life in which He is consulted, and which is all shaped at His bidding, and by His strength, and for His dear name, will 'stand foursquare to all the winds that blow,' and, being founded upon a rock, will never fall.

But we may also note that in the strength of that thought, that we are before the Lord our God, we shall best establish our ways in the sense that we shall keep on steadily and doggedly on the path. Well begun may be half ended, but there is often a long dreary grind before it is wholly ended, and the last half of the march is the wearisome half. The Bible has a great deal to say about the need of obstinate persistence on the right road. 'Ye did run well, what did hinder you?' 'Cast not away your confidence, which hath great recompense of reward.' 'We are made partakers of Christ if we hold fast the beginning of our confidence firm unto the end.' 'He that overcometh and keepeth My words unto the end, to him will I give authority.' Lives which derive their impulse from communion with

God will not come to a dead stop half-way on their road, like a motor the fuel of which fails; and it will be impossible for any man to 'endure unto the end,' and so to be heir of the promise—'the same shall be saved,' unless he draws his persistency from Him who 'fainteth not, neither is weary,' and who 'reneweth strength to them that have no might,' so that in all the monotonous levels they shall 'walk and not faint,' and in all the crises, demanding brief spurts of energy, 'they shall run and not be weary,' and at last 'shall mount up with wings as eagles.' A path ordered and a path persisted in ought to be the path of every Christian man.

The text finally tells of the prosperity and growing power which attends such a course. 'Jotham became mighty.' That was simple outward blessing. His kingdom prospered, and, according to the theocratic constitution of Judah, faithfulness to God and material well-being went together. You cannot apply these words, of course, to the outward lives of Christians. It is no doubt true that 'Godliness is profitable for all things,' but there are a great many other things besides the godliness of the man that does them which determine whether a man's undertakings shall prosper in the world's sense or not. It would be a pitiable thing if the full revelation of God in Christ did not teach us Christians more about the meaning and the worth of outward success and inward prosperity than the Old Testament could teach. I hope we have learned that lesson; at least, it is not the fault of our lesson book if we have not. Although it is true that religion does make the best of both worlds, it does not do so by taking the world's estimate of what its best for to-day is, and giving a religious man *that*. Sometimes it does, and sometimes it does not, and whether it does or no

depends on other considerations than the reality of the man's devotion. Good men are often made better by being made sad and unsuccessful. And if they are not bettered by adversity, it is not the fault of the discipline but of the people who undergo it.

But though the husk of my text falls away—and we should thank God that it has fallen away—the kernel of it is ever true. Whosoever will thus root his life in the living thought of a loving, divine Eye being perpetually upon him, and make that thought a motive for holiness and loving obedience and effort after service, will find that the true success, the only success and the only strength that are worth a man's ambition to desire or his effort to secure, will assuredly be his. He may be voted a failure as regards the world's prizes. But a man that 'orders his ways,' and perseveres in ways thus ordered, 'before the Lord' will for reward get more power to order his ways, and a purer and more thrilling, less interrupted and more childlike vision of the Face that looks upon him. God's 'eyes behold the upright,' and the upright behold His eyes, and in the interchange of glances there is power; and in that power is the highest reward for ordered lives. We shall get power to do, power to bear, power to think aright, power to love, power to will, power to behold, power to deny ourselves, 'power to become sons of God.' This is the success of life, when out of all its changes, and by reason of all its efforts, we realise more fully our filial possession of our Father, and our Father's changeless love to us. We shall become mighty with the might that is born of obedience and faith if we order our ways before the Lord our God. 'The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more until the noontide of the day.'

COSTLY AND FATAL HELP

'He sacrificed unto the gods of Damascus, which smote him: and he said, Because the gods of the kings of Syria help them, therefore will I sacrifice to them, that they may help me. But they were the ruin of him and of all Israel. --2 CHRON. XXVIII. 23.

AHAZ came to the throne when a youth of twenty. From the beginning he reversed the policy of his father, and threw himself into the arms of the heathen party. In a comparatively short reign of sixteen years he stamped out the worship of God, and nearly ruined the kingdom.

He did not plunge into idolatry for want of good advice. The greatest of the prophets stood beside him. Isaiah addressed to him remonstrances which might have made the most reckless pause, and promises which might have kindled hope and courage in the bosom of despair. Hosea in the northern kingdom, Micah in Judah, and other less brilliant names were amongst the stars which shone even in that dark night. But their light was all in vain. The foolish lad had got the bit between his teeth, and, like many another young man, thought to show his 'breadth' and his 'spirit' by neglecting his father's counsellors, and abandoning his father's faith. He was ready to worship anything that called itself a god, always excepting Jehovah. He welcomed Baal, Moloch, Rimmon, and many more with an indiscriminate eagerness that would have been ludicrous if it had not been tragical. The more he multiplied his gods the more he multiplied his sorrows, and the more he multiplied his sorrows the more he multiplied his gods.

From all sides the invaders came. From north, north-east, east, south-east, south, they swarmed in upon him.

They tore away the fringes of his kingdom; and hostile armies flaunted their banners beneath the very walls of Jerusalem.

And then, in his despair, like a scorpion in a circle of fire, he inflicted a deadly wound on himself by calling in the fatal help of Assyria. Nothing loth, that warlike power responded, scattered his less formidable foes, and then swallowed the prey which it had dragged from between the teeth of the Israelites and Syrians. The result of Ahaz's frantic appeals to false gods and faithless men may still be read on the cuneiform inscriptions, where, amidst a long list of unknown tributary kings, stands, with a Philistine on one side of him and an Ammonite on the other, the shameful record, 'Ahaz of Judah.'

That was what came of forsaking the God of his fathers. It is a type of what always has come, and always must come, of a godless life. That is the point of view from which I wish to look at the story, and at these words of my text which gather the whole spirit of it into one sentence.

I. First, then, let me ask you to notice how this narrative illustrates for us the crowd of vain helpers to which a man has to take when he turns his back upon God.

If we compare the narrative in our chapter with the parallel in the Second Book of Kings, we get a very vivid picture of the strange medley of idolatries which they introduced. Amongst Ahaz's new gods are, for instance, the golden calves of Israel and the ferocious Moloch of Ammon, to whom he sacrificed, passing through the fire at least one of his own children. The ancient sacred places of the Canaanites, on every high hill and beneath every conspicuous tree, again

smoked with incense to half-forgotten local deities. In every open space in Jerusalem he planted a brand-new altar with a brand-new worship attendant upon it. In the Temple, he brushed aside the altar that Solomon had made and put up a new one, copied from one which he had seen at Damascus. The importation of the Damascene altar, I suppose, meant, as our text tells us, the importation of the Damascene gods along with it.

Side by side with that multiplication of false deities went the almost entire neglect of the worship of Jehovah, until at last, as his reign advanced and he floundered deeper into his troubles, the Temple was spoiled, everything in it that could be laid hands upon was sent to the melting-pot, to pay the Assyrian tribute; and then the doors were shut, the lamps extinguished, the fire quenched on the cold altars, and the silent Temple left to the bats and — *the Shekinah*; for God still abode in the deserted house.

Further, side by side with this appealing all round the horizon to whatsoever obscene and foul shape seemed to promise some help, there went the foolish appeal to the northern invaders to come and aid him, which they did, to his destruction. His whole career is that of a godless and desperate man who will grasp at anything that offers deliverance, and will worship any god or devil who will extricate him from his troubles.

Is the breed extinct, think you? Is there any one among us who, if he cannot get what he wants by fair ways, will try to get it by foul? Do none of you ever bow down to Satan for a slice of the kingdoms of this world? Ahaz has still plenty of brothers and sisters in all our churches and chapels.

This story illustrates for us what, alas! is only too true, both on the broad scale, as to the generation in which we live, and on the narrower field of our own individual lives. Look at the so-called cultured classes of Europe to-day; turning away, as so many of them are, from the Lord God of their fathers; what sort of gods are they worshipping instead? Scraps from Buddhism, the Vedas, any sacred books but the Bible; quackeries, and charlatanism, and dreams, and fragmentary philosophies all pieced together, to try and make up a whole, instead of the old-fashioned whole that they have left behind them. There are men and women in many congregations who, in modern fashion, are doing precisely the thing that Ahaz did—having abandoned Christianity, they are trying to make up for it by hastily stitching together shreds and patches that they have found in other systems. ‘The garment is narrower than that a man can wrap himself in it,’ and a creed patched together so will never make a seamless whole which can be trusted not to rend.

But look, further, how the same thing is true as to the individual lives of godless men.

Many of us are trying to make up for not having the One by seeking to stay our hearts on the many. But no accumulation of insufficiencies will ever make a sufficiency. You may fill the heaven all over with stars, bright and thickly set as those in the whitest spot in the galaxy, and it will be night still. Day needs the sun, and the sun is one, and when it comes the twinkling lights are forgotten. You cannot make up for God by any extended series of creatures, any more than a row of figures that stretched from here to *Sirius* and back again would approximate to infinitude.

The very fact of the multitude of helpers is a sign

that none of them is sufficient. There is no end of 'cures' for toothache, that is to say there is none. There is no end of helps for men that have abandoned God, that is to say, every one in turn when it is tried, and the stress of the soul rests upon it, gives, and is found to be a broken staff that pierces the hand that leans upon it.

Consult your own experience. What is the meaning of the unrest and distraction that mark the lives of most of the men in this generation? Why is it that you hurry from business to pleasure, from pleasure to business, until it is scarcely possible to get a quiet breathing time for thought at all? Why is it but because one after another of your gods have proved insufficient, and so fresh altars must be built for fresh idolatries, and new experiments made, of which we can safely prophesy the result will be the old one. We have not got beyond St. Augustine's saying:— 'Oh, God! my heart was made for Thee, and in Thee only doth it find repose.' The many idols, though you multiply them beyond count, all put together will never make the One God. You are seeking what you will never find. The many pearls that you seek will never be enough for you. The true wealth is One, 'One pearl of great price.'

II. So notice again how this story teaches the heavy cost of these helpers' help.

Ahaz had, as he thought, two strings to his bow. He had the gods of Damascus and of other lands on one hand, he had the king of Assyria on another. They both of them exacted onerous terms before they would stir a foot to his aid. As for the northern conqueror, all the wealth of the king and of the princes and of the Temple was sent to Assyria as the price of his

hurtful help. As for the gods, his helpers, one of his sons at least went into the furnace to secure their favour; and what other sacrifices he may have made besides the sacrifice of his conscience and his soul history does not tell us. These were considerable subsidies to have to be paid down before any aid was granted.

Do *you* buy this world's help any cheaper, my brother? You get nothing for nothing in that market. It is a big price that you have to pay before these mercenaries will come to fight on your side. Here is a man that 'succeeds in life,' as we call it. What does it cost him? Well! it has cost him the suppression, the atrophy by disuse, of many capacities in his soul which were far higher and nobler than those that have been exercised in his success. It has cost him all his days; it has possibly cost him the dying out of generous sympathies and the stimulating of unwholesome selfishness. Ah! he has bought his prosperity very dear. Political economists have much to say about the 'appreciation of gold.' I think if people would estimate what they pay for it, in an immense majority of cases, in treasure that cannot be weighed and stamped, they would find it to be about the dearest thing in God's universe; and that there are few men who make worse bargains than the men who give *themselves* for worldly success, even when they receive what they give themselves for.

There are some of you who know how much what you call enjoyment has cost you. Some of us have bought pleasure at the price of innocence, of moral dignity, of stained memories, of polluted imaginations, of an incapacity to rise above the flesh: and some of us have bought it at the price of health. The world

has a way of getting more out of you than it gives to you.

At the best, if you are not Christian men and women, whether you are men of business, votaries of pleasure, seekers after culture and refinement or anything else, you have given Heaven to get earth. Is that a good bargain? Is it much wiser than that of a horde of naked savages that sell a great tract of fair country, with gold-bearing reefs in it, for a bottle of rum, and a yard or two of calico? What is the difference? You have been fooled out of the inheritance which God meant for you; and you have got for it transient satisfaction, and partial as it is transient. If you are not Christian people, you have to buy this world's wealth and goods at the price of God and of your own souls. And I ask you if that is an investment which recommends itself to your common sense. Oh! my brother; 'what shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world, and lose himself?' Answer the question.

III. Lastly, we may gather from this story an illustration of the fatal falsehood of the world's help.

Ahaz pauperised himself to buy the hireling swords of Assyria, and he got them; but, as it says in the narrative, 'the king came unto him, and distressed him, but strengthened him not.' He helped Ahaz at first. He scattered the armies of which the king of Judah was afraid like chaff, with his fierce and disciplined onset. And then, having driven them off the bleeding prey, he put his own paw upon it, and growled 'Mine!' And where he struck his claws there was little more hope of life for the prostrate creature below him.

Ay! and that is what this world always does. In the case before us there was providential guidance of

the politics of the Eastern nations in order to bring about these results; and we do not look for anything of that sort. No! But there are natural laws at work to-day which are God's laws, and which ensure the worthlessness of the help bought so dear.

A godless life has at the best only partial satisfaction, and that partial satisfaction soon diminishes. 'Even in laughter the heart is sorrowful, and the end of that mirth is heaviness.'

That is the experience of all men, and I need not dwell upon the threadbare commonplaces which have survived from generation to generation, because each generation in turn has found them so piteously true, about the incompleteness and the fleetingness of all the joys and treasures of this life. The awful power of habit, if there were no other reason, takes the edge off all gratification except in so far as God is in it. Nothing fully retains its power to satisfy. Nothing has that power absolutely at any moment; but even what measure of it any of our possessions or pursuits may have for a time, soon, or at all events by degrees, passes away. The greater part of life is but like drinking out of empty cups, and the cups drop from our hands. What one of our purest and peace fullest poets said in his haste about all his kind is true in spirit of all godless lives:—

• We poets, in our youth, begin in gladness,
But thereof cometh, in the end, despondency and madness.'

'Vanity of vanities! saith'—not the Preacher only, but the inmost heart of every godless man and woman—
'vanity of vanities! all is vanity!'

And do not forget that, partial and transient as these satisfactions of which I have been speaking are,

they derive what power of helping and satisfying is in them only from the silence of our consciences, and our success in being able to shut out realities. One word, they say, spoken too loud, brings down the avalanche, and beneath its white, cold death, the active form is motionless and the beating heart lies still. One word from conscience, one touch of an awakened reflectiveness, one glance at the end—the coffin and the shroud and what comes after these—slay your worldly satisfactions as surely as that falling snow would crush some light-winged, gauzy butterfly that had been dancing at the cliff's foot. Your jewellery is all imitation. It is well enough for candle-light. Would you like to try the testing acid upon it? Here is a drop of it. 'Know thou that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment.' Does it smoke? or does it stand the test? Here is another drop. 'This night thy soul shall be required of thee.' Does it stand that test? My brother! do not be afraid to take in all the facts of your earthly life, and do not pretend to satisfy yourselves with satisfactions which dare not face realities, and shrivel up at their presence.

These fatal helpers come as friends and allies, and they remain as masters. Ahaz and a hundred other weak princes have tried the policy of sending for a strong foreign power to scatter their enemies, and it has always turned out one way. The foreigner has come and he has stopped. The auxiliary has become the lord, and he that called him to his aid becomes his tributary. Ay! and so it is with all the things of this world. Here is some pleasant indulgence that I call to my help lightly and thoughtlessly. It is very agreeable and does what I wanted with it, and I try it again

Still it answers to my call. And then after a while I say, 'I am going to give that up,' and I cannot. I have brought in a master when I thought I was only bringing in an ally that I could dismiss when I liked. The sides of the pit are very slippery; it is gay travelling down them, but when the animal is trapped at the bottom there is no possibility of getting up again. So some of you, dear friends! have got masters in your delights, masters in your pursuits, masters in your habits. These are your gods, these are your tyrants, and you will find out that they are so, if ever, in your own strength, you try to break away from them.

So let me plead with you. With some of you, perhaps, my voice, as a familiar voice, that in some measure, however undeservedly, you trust, may have influence. Let me plead with you—do not run after these will-o'-the-wisps that will only lure you into destruction, but follow the light of life which is Jesus Christ Himself. Do not take these tyrants for your helpers, who will master you under pretence of aiding you; and work their will of you instead of lightening your burden. The same unwise and hopeless mode of life, which we have been describing this evening by one symbolic illustration, as calling vain helpers to our aid, was presented by Ahaz's great contemporary Isaiah, in words which Ahaz himself may have heard, as 'striking a covenant with death, and making lies our refuge.' Some of us, alas! have been doing that all our lives. Let such hearken to the solemn words which may have rung in the ears of this unworthy king. 'Judgment also will I lay to the line, and righteousness to the plummet, and the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies.' I come to you, dear friends! to press on your acceptance the true Guide and Helper—even Jesus

Christ your Brother, in whose single Self you will find all that you have vainly sought dispersed 'at sundry times and in divers manners'—among creatures. Take Him for your Saviour by trusting your whole selves to Him. He is the Sacrifice by whose blood all our sins are washed away, and the Indweller, by whose Spirit all our spirits are ennobled and gladdened. I ask you to take Him for your Helper, who will never deceive you; to call whom to our aid is to be secure and victorious for ever. 'Behold! I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner-stone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste.'

A GODLY REFORMATION

'Hezekiah began to reign when he was five and twenty years old, and he reigned nine and twenty years in Jerusalem. And his mother's name was Abijah, the daughter of Zechariah. 2. And he did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, according to all that David his father had done. 3. He in the first year of his reign, in the first month, opened the doors of the house of the Lord, and repaired them. 4. And he brought in the priests and the Levites, and gathered them together into the east street, 5. And said unto them, Hear me, ye Levites; Sanctify now yourselves, and sanctify the house of the Lord God of your fathers, and carry forth the filthiness out of the holy place. 6. For our fathers have trespassed, and done that which was evil in the eyes of the Lord our God, and have forsaken Him, and have turned away their faces from the habitation of the Lord, and turned their backs. 7. Also they have shut up the doors of the porch, and put out the lamps, and have not burnt incense, nor offered burnt-offerings in the holy place unto the God of Israel. 8. Wherefore the wrath of the Lord was upon Judah and Jerusalem, and He hath delivered them to trouble, to astonishment, and to hissing, as ye see with your eyes. 9. For, lo, our fathers have fallen by the sword: and our sons and our daughters and our wives are in captivity for this. 10. Now it is in mine heart to make a covenant with the Lord God of Israel, that His fierce wrath may turn away from us. 11. My sons, be not now negligent: for the Lord hath chosen you to stand before Him, to serve Him, and that ye should minister unto Him, and burn incense.'—2 CHRON. xxx. 1-11.

HEZEKIAH, the best of the later kings, had the worst for his father, and another almost as bad for his son. His own piety was probably deepened by the mad extravagance of his father's boundless idolatry, which

brought the kingdom to the verge of ruin. Action and reaction are equal and contrary. Saints grown amidst fashionable and deep corruption are generally strong, and reformers usually arise from the midst of the systems which they overthrow. Hezekiah came to a tottering throne and an all but beggared nation, ringed around by triumphant enemies. His brave young heart did not quail. He sought 'first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness,' and of the two pressing needs for Judah, political peace and religious purity, he began with the last. The Book of Kings tells at most length the civil history; the Book of Chronicles, as usual, lays most stress on the ecclesiastical. The two complete each other. The present passage gives a beautiful picture of the vigorous, devout young king setting about the work of reformation.

We may note, first, his prompt action. Joash had to whip up the reluctant priests with his 'See that ye hasten the matter!' Hezekiah lets no grass grow under his feet, but begins his reforms with his reign. 'The first month' (ver. 3) possibly, indeed, means the first month of the calendar, not of Hezekiah, who may have come to the throne in the later part of the Jewish year; but, in any case, no time was lost. The statement in verse 3 may be taken as a general *résumé* of what follows in detail, but this vigorous speech to the priests was clearly among the new king's first acts. No doubt his purpose had slowly grown while his father was affronting Heaven with his mania for idols. Such decisive, swift action does not come without protracted, previous brooding. The hidden fires gather slowly in the silent crater, however rapidly they burst out at last.

We can never begin good things too early, and when

we come into new positions, it is always prudence as well as bravery to show our colours unmistakably from the first. Many a young man, launched among fresh associations, has been ruined because of beginning with temporising timidity. It is easier to take the right standing at first than to shift to it afterwards. Hezekiah might have been excused if he had thought that the wretched state of political affairs left by Ahaz needed his first attention. Edomites on the east, Philistines on the west and south, Syrians and Assyrians on the north, 'compassed him about like bees,' and worldly prudence would have said, 'Look after these enemies to-day, and the Temple to-morrow.' He was wiser than that, knowing that these were effects of the religious corruption, and so he went at that first. It is useless trying to mend a nation's fortunes unless you mend its morals and religion.

And there are some things which are best done quickly, both in individual and national life. Leaving off bad habits by degrees is not hopeful. The only thing to be done is to break with them utterly and at once. One strong, swift blow, right through the heart, kills the wild beast. Slighter cuts may make him bleed to death, but he may kill you first. The existing state was undeniably sinful. There was no need for deliberation as to that. Therefore there was no reason for delay. Let us learn the lesson that, where conscience has no doubts, we should have no dawdling. 'I made haste, and delayed not to keep thy commandment.'

Note, too, in Hezekiah's speech, the true order of religious reformation. The priests and Levites were not foremost in it, as indeed is only too often the case with ecclesiastics in all ages. Probably many of them had been content to serve Ahaz as priests of his multi-

form idolatry. At all events, they needed 'sanctifying,' though no doubt the word is here used in reference to merely ceremonial uncleanness. Still the requirement that they should cleanse themselves before they cleansed the Temple has more than ceremonial significance. Impure hands are not fit for the work of religious reformation, though they have often been employed in it. What was the weakness of the Reformation but that the passions of princes and nobles were so soon and generally enlisted for it, and marred it? He that enters into the holy place, especially if his errand be to cleanse it, must have 'clean hands, and a pure heart.' The hands that wielded the whip of small cords, and drove out the money-changers, were stainless, and therefore strong. Some of us are very fond of trying to set churches to rights. Let us begin with ourselves, lest, like careless servants, we leave dirty finger-marks where we have been 'cleaning.'

The next point in the speech is the profound and painful sense of existing corruption. Note the long-drawn-out enumeration of evils in verses 6 and 7, starting with the general recognition of the fathers' trespass, advancing to the more specific sin of forsaking Him and His house, and dwelling, finally, as with fascinated horror, on all the details of closed shrine and quenched lamps and cold altars. The historical truth of the picture is confirmed by the close of the previous chapter, and its vividness shows how deeply Hezekiah had felt the shame and sin of Ahaz. It is not easy to keep clear of the influence of prevailing corruptions of religion. Familiarity weakens abhorrence, and the stained embodiments of the ideal hide its purity from most eyes. But no man will be

God's instrument to make society, the church, or the nome, better, unless he feels keenly the existing evils. We do not need to cherish a censorious spirit, but we do need to guard against an unthinking acquiescence in the present state of things, and a self-complacent reluctance to admit their departure from the divine purpose for the church. There is need to-day for a like profound consciousness of evil, and like efforts after new purity. If we individually lived nearer God, we should be less acclimatised to the Church's imperfections. No doubt Hezekiah's clear sight of the sinfulness of the idolatry so universal round him was largely owing to Isaiah's influence. Eyes which have caught sight of the true King of Israel, and of the pure light of His kingdom, will be purged to discern the sore need for purifying the Lord's house.

The clear insight into the national sin gives as clear understanding of the national suffering. Hezekiah speaks, in verses 8 and 9, as the Law and the Prophets had been speaking for centuries, and as God's providence had been uttering in act all through the national history. But so slow are men to learn familiar truths that Ahaz had grasped at idol after idol to rescue him; 'but they were the ruin of him, and of all Israel.' How difficult it is to hammer plain truths, even with the mallet of troubles, into men's heads! How blind we all are to the causal connection between sin and sorrow! Hezekiah saw the iron link uniting them, and his whole policy was based upon that 'wherefore.' Of course, if we accept the Biblical statements as to the divine dealing with Israel and Judah, obedience and disobedience were there followed by reward and suffering more certainly and directly than is now the case in either national or individual life. But it still remains

true that it is a 'bitter' as well as an 'evil' thing to depart from the living God. If we would find the cause of our own or of a nation's sorrows, we had better begin our search among our or its sins.

That phrase 'an astonishment, and an hissing' (ver. 8) is new. It appears for the first time in Micah (Micah vi. 16), and he, we know, exercised influence on Hezekiah (Jer. xxvi. 18, 19). Perhaps the king is here quoting the prophet.

The exposition of the sin and its fruit is followed by the king's resolve for himself, and, so far as may be, for his people. The phrase 'it is in my heart' expresses fixed determination, not mere wish. It is used by David and of him, in reference to his resolve to build the Temple. 'To make a covenant' probably means to renew the covenant, made long ago at Sinai, but broken by sin. The king has made up his mind, and announces his determination. He does not consult priests or people, but expects their acquiescence. So, in the early days of Christianity, the 'conversion' of a king meant that of his people. Of course, the power of the kings of Israel and Judah to change the national religion at their pleasure shows how slightly any religion had penetrated, and how much, at the best, it was a matter of mere ceremonial worship with the masses. People who worshipped Ahaz's rabble of gods and godlings to-day because he bade them, and Hezekiah's God to-morrow, had little worship for either, and were much the same through all changes.

Hezekiah was in earnest, and his resolve was none the less right because it was moved by a desire to turn away the fierce anger of the Lord. Dread of sin's consequences and a desire to escape these is no unworthy motive, however some superfine moralists now-

days may call it so. It is becoming unfashionable to preach 'the terror of the Lord.' The more is the pity, and the less is the likelihood of persuading men. But, however kindled, the firm determination (which does not wait for others to concur) that 'As for me, I will serve the Lord,' is the grand thing for us all to imitate. That strong young heart showed itself kingly in its resolve, as it had shown itself sensitive to evil and tender in contemplating the widespread sorrow. If we would brace our feeble wills, and screw them to the sticking-point of immovable determination to make a covenant with God, let us meditate on our departures from Him, the Lover and Benefactor of our souls, and on the dreadfulfulness of His anger and the misery of those who forsake Him.

Once more the king turns to the priests. He began and he finishes with them, as if he were not sure of their reliableness. His tone is kindly, 'My sons,' but yet monitory. They would not have been warned against 'negligence' unless they had obviously needed it, nor would they have been stimulated to their duties by reminding them of their prerogatives, unless they had been apt to slight these. Officials, whose business is concerned with the things of God, are often apt to drop into an easy-going pace. Negligent work may suit unimportant offices, but is hideously inconsistent with the tasks and aims of God's servants. If there is any work which has to be done 'with both hands, earnestly,' it is theirs. Unless we put all our strength into it, we shall get no good for ourselves or others out of it. The utmost tension of all powers, the utmost husbanding of every moment, is absolutely demanded by the greatness of the task; and the voice of the great Master says to all His servants, 'My sons, be

not now negligent.' Ungirt loins and unlit lamps are fatal.

We should meditate, too, on the prerogatives and lofty offices to which Christ calls those who love Him; not to minister to self-complacency, as if we were so much better than other men, but to deepen our sense of responsibility, and stir us to strenuous efforts to be what we are called to be. If Christian people thought more earnestly on what Jesus Christ means them to be to the world, they would not so often counterwork His purpose and shirk their own duties. Crowns are heavy to wear. Gifts are calls to service. If we are chosen to be His ministers, we have solemn responsibilities. If we are to burn incense before Him, our censers need to be bright and free from strange fire. If we are the lights of the world, our business is to shine.

SACRIFICE RENEWED

'Then they went in to Hezekiah the king, and said, We have cleansed all the house of the Lord, and the altar of burnt-offering, with all the vessels thereof, and the shew-bread table, with all the vessels thereof. 19. Moreover, all the vessels, which king Ahaz in his reign did cast away in his transgression, have we prepared and sanctified, and, behold, they are before the altar of the Lord. 20. Then Hezekiah the king rose early, and gathered the rulers of the city, and went up to the house of the Lord. 21. And they brought seven bullocks, and seven rams, and seven lambs, and seven he goats, for a sin-offering for the kingdom, and for the sanctuary, and for Judah. And he commanded the priests, the sons of Aaron, to offer them on the altar of the Lord. 22. So they killed the bullocks, and the priests received the blood, and sprinkled it on the altar: likewise, when they had killed the rams, they sprinkled the blood upon the altar: they killed also the lambs, and they sprinkled the blood upon the altar. 23. And they brought forth the he goats for the sin-offering before the king and the congregation; and they laid their hands upon them. 24. And the priests killed them, and they made reconciliation with their blood upon the altar, to make an atonement for all Israel: for the king commanded that the burnt-offering and the sin-offering should be made for all Israel. 25. And he set the Levites in the house of the Lord with cymbals, with psalteries, and with harps, according to the commandment of David, and of Gad the king's seer, and Nathan the prophet: for so was the commandment of the Lord by His prophets. 26. And the Levites stood with the instruments of David, and the priests with the trumpets. 27. And Hezekiah commanded to offer the burnt-offering upon the altar. And when the burnt-offering began, the song of the Lord began also with the trumpets, and with the instruments ordained by David king of Israel. 28. And all the congregation worshipped, and the singers sang, and the trumpeters sounded: and all this continued until the burnt-offering was finished. 29. And when they had made an end

of offering, the king and all that were present with him bowed themselves, and worshipped. 30. Moreover, Hezekiah the king and the princes commanded the Levites to sing praises unto the Lord with the words of David, and of Asaph the seer. And they sang praises with gladness, and they bowed their heads and worshipped. 31. Then Hezekiah answered and said, Now ye have consecrated yourselves unto the Lord, come near, and bring sacrifices and thank-offerings into the house of the Lord. And the congregation brought in sacrifices and thank-offerings; and as many as were of a free heart burnt offerings. —2 CHRON. xxix. 18-31.

AHAZ, Hezekiah's father, had wallowed in idolatry, worshipping any and every god but Jehovah. He had shut up the Temple, defiled the sacred vessels, and 'made him altars in every corner of Jerusalem.' And the result was that he brought the kingdom very near ruin, was not allowed to be buried in the tombs of the kings, and left his son a heavy task to patch up the mischief he had wrought. Hezekiah began at the right end of his task. 'In the first year of his reign, in the first month,' he set about restoring the worship of Jehovah. The relations with Syria and Damascus would come right if the relations with Judah's God were right. 'First things first' was his motto, and perhaps he discerned the true sequence more accurately than some great political pundits do nowadays. So neglected had the Temple been that a strong force of priests and Levites took a fortnight to 'carry forth the filthiness out of the holy place to the brook Kidron,' and to cleanse and ceremonially sanctify the sacred vessels. Then followed at once the re-establishment of the Temple worship, which is narrated in the passage.

The first thing to be noted is that the whole movement back to Jehovah was a one-man movement. It was Hezekiah's doing and his only. No priest is named as prominent in it, and the slowness of the whole order is especially branded in verse 34. No prophet is named; was there any one prompting the king? Perhaps

Isaiah did, though his chapter I., with its scathing repudiation of 'the burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts,' suggests that he did not think the restoration of sacrifice so important as that the nation should 'cease to do evil and learn to do well.' The people acquiesced in the king's worship of Jehovah, as they had acquiesced in other kings' worship of Baal or Moloch or Hadad. When kings take to being religious reformers, they make swift converts, but their work is as slight as it is speedy, and as short-lived as it is rapid. Manasseh was Hezekiah's successor, and swept away all his work after twenty-nine years, and apparently the mass of his people followed him just as they had followed Hezekiah. Religion must be a matter of personal conviction and individual choice. Imposed from without, or adopted because other people adopt it, it is worthless.

Another point to notice is that Hezekiah's reformation was mainly directed to ritual, and does not seem to have included either theology or ethics. Was he quite right in his estimate of what was the first thing? Isaiah, in the passage already referred to, does not seem to think so. To him, as to all the prophets, foul hands could not bring acceptable sacrifices, and worship was an abomination unless preceded by obedience to the command: 'Put away the evil of your doings from before Mine eyes.' The filth in the hearts of the men of Judah was more 'rank, and smelt to heaven' more offensively, than that in the Temple, which took sixteen days to shovel into Kidron. No doubt ceremonial bulked more largely in the days of the Old Covenant than it does in those of the New, and both the then stage of revelation and the then spiritual stature of the recipients of revelation required that it should do so.

But the true religious reformers, the prophets, were never weary of insisting that, even in those days, moral and spiritual reformation should come first, and that unless it did, ritual worship, though it were nominally offered to Jehovah, was as abhorrent to Him as if it had been avowedly offered to Baal. Not a little so-called Christian worship to-day, judged by the same test, is as truly heathen superstition as if it had been paid to Mumbo-Jumbo.

But when all deductions have been made, the scene depicted in the passage is not only an affecting, but an instructive one. Strangely unlike our notions of worship, and to us almost repulsive, must have been the slaying of three hundred and seventy animals and the offering of them as burnt offerings. Try to picture the rivers of blood, the contortions of the dumb brutes, the priests bedaubed with gore, the smell of the burnt flesh, the blare of the trumpets, the shouts of the worshippers, the clashing cymbals, and realise what a world parts it from 'They went up into the upper chamber where they were abiding . . . these all with one accord continued steadfastly in prayer, with the women, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, and with His brethren'! Sacrifice has been the essential feature in all religions before Christ. It has dropped out of worship wherever Christ has been accepted. Why? Because it spoke of a deep, permanent, universal need, and because Christ was recognised as having met the need. People who deny the need, and people who deny that Jesus on the Cross has satisfied it, may be invited to explain these two facts, written large on the history of humanity.

That brings us to the most important aspect of Hezekiah's great sacrifice. It sets forth the stages by which

men can approach to God. It is symbolic of spiritual facts, and prophetic of Christ's work and of our way of coming to God through Him. The first requisite for Judah's return to Jehovah, whom they had forsaken, was the presentation of a 'sin offering.' The king and the congregation laid their hands on the heads of the goats, thereby, as it were, transferring their own sinful personality to them. Thus laden with the nation's sins, they were slain, and in their death the nation, as it were, bore the penalty of its sin. Representation and substitution were dramatised in the sacrifice. The blood sprinkled on the altar (which had previously been 'sanctified' by sprinkling of blood, and so made capable of presenting what touched it to Jehovah), made 'atonement for all Israel.' We note in passing the emphasis of 'Israel' here, extending the benefit of the sacrifice to the separated tribes of the Northern Kingdom, in a gush of yearning love and desire that they, too, might be reconciled to Jehovah. And is not this the first step towards any man's reconciliation with God? Is not

'My faith would lay her hand
On that dear head of Thine,'

the true expression of the first requisite for us all? Jesus is the sin-offering for the world. In His death He bears the world's sin. His blood is presented to God, and if we have associated ourselves with Him by faith, that blood sprinkled on the altar covers all our sins.

Then followed in this parabolic ceremonial the burnt offering. And that is the second stage of our return to God, for it expresses the consecration of our forgiven selves, as being consumed by the holy and blessed

fire of a self-devotion, kindled by the 'unspeakable gift,' which fire, burning away all foulness, will make us tenfold ourselves. That fire will burn up only our bonds, and we shall walk at liberty in it. And that burnt-offering will always be accompanied with 'the song of Jehovah,' and the joyful sound of the trumpets and 'the instruments of David.' The treasures of Christian poetry have always been inspired by the Cross, and the consequent rapture of self-surrender. Calvary is the true fountain of song.

The last stage in Hezekiah's great sacrifice was 'thank-offerings,' brought by 'as many as were of a willing heart.' And will not the self-devotion, kindled by the fire of love, speak in daily life by practical service, and the whole activities of the redeemed man be a long thank-offering for the Lamb who 'bears away the sins of the world'? And if we do not thus offer our whole lives to God, how shall we profess to have taken the priceless benefit of Christ's death? Hezekiah followed the order laid down in the Law, and it is the only order that leads to the goal. First, the atoning sacrifice of the slain Lamb; next, our identification with Him and it by faith; then the burnt-offering of a surrendered self, with the song of praise sounding ever through it; and last, the life of service, offering all our works to God, and so reaching the perfection of life on earth and antedating the felicities of heaven.

A LOVING CALL TO REUNION

¹And Hezekiah sent to all Israel and Judah, and wrote letters also to Ephraim and Manasseh, that they should come to the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, to keep the passover unto the Lord God of Israel. 2. For the king had taken counsel, and his princes, and all the congregation in Jerusalem, to keep the passover in the second month. 3. For they could not keep it at that time, because the priests had not sanctified themselves sufficiently, neither had the people gathered themselves together to Jerusalem. 4. And the thing pleased the king and all the congregation. 5. So they established a decree to make proclamation throughout all Israel, from Beer-sheba even to Dan, that they should come to keep the passover unto the Lord God of Israel at Jerusalem: for they had not done it of a long time in such sort as it was written. 6. So the posts went with the letters from the king and his princes throughout all Israel and Judah, and according to the commandment of the king, saying, Ye children of Israel, turn again unto the Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, and he will return to the remnant of you, that are escaped out of the hand of the kings of Assyria. 7. And be not ye like your fathers, and like your brethren, which trespassed against the Lord God of their fathers, who therefore gave them up to desolation, as ye see. 8. Now, be ye not stiffnecked, as your fathers were, but yield yourselves unto the Lord, and enter into His sanctuary, which He hath sanctified for ever: and serve the Lord your God, that the fierceness of His wrath may turn away from you. 9. For if ye turn again unto the Lord, your brethren and your children shall find compassion before them that lead them captive, so that they shall come again into this land: for the Lord your God is gracious and merciful, and will not turn away His face from you, if ye return unto Him. 10. So the posts passed from city to city through the country of Ephraim and Manasseh, even unto Zebulun: but they laughed them to scorn, and mocked them. 11. Nevertheless divers of Asher and Manasseh and of Zebulun humbled themselves, and came to Jerusalem. 12. Also in Judah the hand of God was to give them one heart to do the commandment of the king and of the princes, by the word of the Lord. 13. And there assembled at Jerusalem much people to keep the feast of unleavened bread in the second month, a very great congregation.—
2 CHRON. XXX. 1-13.

THE date of Hezekiah's passover is uncertain, for, while the immediate connection of this narrative with the preceding account of his cleansing the Temple and restoring the sacrificial worship suggests that the passover followed directly on those events, which took place at the beginning of the reign, the language employed in the message to the northern tribes (vers. 6, 7, 9) seems to imply the previous fall of the kingdom of Israel. If so, this passover did not occur till after 721 B.C., the date of the capture of Samaria, six years after Hezekiah's accession.

The sending of messengers from Jerusalem on such

an errand would scarcely have been possible if the northern kingdom had still been independent. Perhaps its fall was thought by Hezekiah to open the door to drawing 'the remnant that were escaped' back to the ancient unity of worship, at all events, if not of polity. No doubt a large number had been left in the northern territory, and Hezekiah may have hoped that calamity had softened their enmity to his kingdom, and perhaps touched them with longings for the old worship. At all events, like a good man, he will stretch out a hand to the alienated brethren, now that evil days have fallen on them. The hour of an enemy's calamity should be our opportunity for seeking to help and proffering reconciliation. We may find that trouble inclines wanderers to come back to God.

The alteration of the time of keeping the passover from the thirteenth day of the first month to the same day of the second was in accordance with the liberty granted in Numbers ix. 10, 11, to persons unclean by contact with a dead body or 'in a journey afar off.' The decision to have the passover was not taken in time to allow of the necessary removal of uncleanness from the priests nor of the assembling of the people, and therefore the permission to defer it for a month was taken advantage of, in order to allow full time for the despatch of the messengers and the journeys of the farthest northern tribes. It is to be observed that Hezekiah took his subjects into counsel, since the step intended was much too great for him to venture on of his own mere motion. So the overtures went out clothed with the authority of the whole kingdom of Judah. It was the voice of a nation that sought to woo back the secessionists.

The messengers were instructed to supplement the

official letters of invitation with earnest entreaties as from the king, of which the gist is given in verses 6-9. With the skill born of intense desire to draw the long-parted kingdoms together, the message touches on ancestral memories, recent bitter experiences, yearnings for the captive kinsfolk, the instinct of self-preservation, and rises at last into the clear light of full faith in, and insight into, God's infinite heart of pardoning pity.

Note the very first words, 'Ye children of Israel,' and consider the effect of this frank recognition of the northern kingdom as part of the undivided Israel. Such recognition might have been misunderstood or spurned when Samaria was gay and prosperous; but when its palaces were desolate, the effect of the old name, recalling happier days, must have been as if the elder brother had come out from the father's house and entreated the prodigal to come back to his place at the fireside. The battle would be more than half won if the appeal that was couched in the very name of Israel was heeded.

Note further how firmly and yet lovingly the sin of the northern kingdom is touched on. The name of Jehovah as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, recalls the ancient days when the undivided people worshipped Him, and the still more ancient, and, to hearers and speakers alike, more sacred, days when the patriarchs received wondrous tokens that He was their God, and they were His people; while the recurrence of 'Israel' as the name of Jacob adds force to its previous use as the name of all His descendants. The possible rejection of the invitation, on the ground which the men of the north, like the Samaritan woman, might have taken, that they were true to their fathers'

worship, is cut away by the reminder that that worship was an innovation, since the fathers of the present generation had been apostate from the God of *their* fathers. The appeal to antiquity often lands men in a bog because it is not carried far enough back. 'The fathers' may lead astray, but if the antiquity to which we appeal is that of which the New Testament is the record, the more conservative we are, the nearer the truth shall we be.

Again, the message touched on a chord that might easily have given a jarring note; namely, the misfortunes of the kingdom. But it was done with so delicate a hand, and so entirely without a trace of rejoicing in a neighbour's calamities, that no susceptibilities could be ruffled, while yet the solemn lesson is unfalteringly pointed. 'He gave them up to desolation, as ye see.' Behind Assyria was Jehovah, and Israel's fall was not wholly explained by the disparity between its strength and the conquerors'. Under and through the play of criminal ambition, cruelty, and earthly politics, the unseen Hand wrought; and the teaching of all the Old Testament history is condensed into that one sad sentence, which points to facts as plain as tragical. In deepest truth it applies to each of us; for, if we trespass against God, we draw down evil on our heads with both hands, and shall find that sin brings the worst desolation—that which sheds gloom over a godless soul.

We note further the deep true insight into God's character and ways expressed in this message. There is a very striking variation in the three designations of Jehovah as 'the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel' (ver. 6), 'the god of their [that is, the preceding generation] fathers' (ver. 7), and 'your God' (ver. 8). The relation

which had subsisted from of old had not been broken by man's apostasy. Jehovah still was, in a true sense, their God, even if His relation to them only bound Him not to leave them unpunished. So their very sufferings proved them His, for 'What son is he whom the father chasteneth not?' But strong, sunny confidence in God shines from the whole message, and reaches its climax in the closing assurance that He is merciful and gracious. The evil results of rebellion are not omitted, but they are not dwelt on. The true magnet to draw wanderers back to God is the loving proclamation of His love. Unless we are sure that He has a heart tender with all pity, and 'open as day to melting charity,' we shall not turn to Him with our hearts.

The message puts the response which it sought in a variety of ways; namely, turning to Jehovah, not being stiff-necked, yielding selves to Jehovah, entering into His sanctuary. More than outward participation in the passover ceremonial is involved. Submission of will, abandonment of former courses of action, docility of spirit ready to be directed anywhere, the habit of abiding with God by communion—all these, the standing characteristics of the religious life, are at least suggested by the invitations here. We are all summoned thus to yield ourselves to God, and especially to do so by surrendering our wills to Him, and to 'enter into His sanctuary,' by keeping up such communion with Him as that, however and wherever occupied, we shall still 'dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of our lives.'

And the summons to return unto God is addressed to us all even more urgently than to Israel. God Himself invites us by the voice of His providences, by His voice within, and by the voice of Jesus Himself, who is ever

saying to each of us, by His death and passion, by His resurrection and ascension, 'Turn ye! turn ye! why will ye die?' and who has more than endorsed Hezekiah's messengers' assurance that 'Jehovah will not turn away His face from' us by His own gracious promise, 'Him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out.'

The king's message met a mingled reception. Some mocked, some were moved and accepted. So, alas! is it with the better message, which is either 'a savour of life unto life or of death unto death.' The same fire melts wax and hardens clay. May it be with all of us as it was in Judah—that we 'have one heart, to do the commandment' and to accept the merciful summons to the great passover!

A STRANGE REWARD FOR FAITHFULNESS

'After these things, and the establishment thereof, Sennacherib, king of Assyria, came.'—2 CHRON. XXXII. 1.

THE Revised Version gives a much more accurate and significant rendering of a part of these words. It reads: 'After these things and *this faithfulness*, Sennacherib, king of Assyria, came.' What are 'these things' and 'this faithfulness'? The former are the whole of the events connected with the religious reformation in Judah, which King Hezekiah inaugurated and carried through so brilliantly and successfully. This 'faithfulness' directly refers to a word in a couple of verses before the text: 'Thus did Hezekiah throughout all Judah; and he wrought that which was good and right and *faithfulness* before the Lord his God.' And, after these things, the re-establishment of religion and this 'faithfulness,' though Hezekiah

was perfect before God in all ritual observances and in practical righteousness, and though he was seeking the Lord his God with all his heart, here is what came of it:—‘After this faithfulness came’ not blessings or prosperity, but ‘Sennacherib, king of Assyria’! The chronicler not only tells this as singular, but one can feel that he is staggered by it. There is a tone of perplexity and wonder in his voice as he records that *this* was what followed the faithful righteousness and heart-devotion of the best king that ever sat on the throne of Judah. I think that this royal martyr’s experience is really a mirror of the experience of devout men in all ages and a revelation of the great law and constant processes of the Divine Providence. And from that point of view I wish to speak now, not only on the words I have read, but on what follows them.

I. We have here the statement of the mystery.

It is the standing puzzle of the Old Testament, how good men come to be troubled, and how bad men come to be prosperous. And although we Christian men and women are a great deal too apt to suppose that we have outlived that rudimentary puzzle of the religious mind, yet I do not think by any means that we have. For we hear men, when the rod falls upon themselves, saying, ‘What have I done that I should be smitten thus?’ or when their friends suffer, saying, ‘What a marvellous thing it is that such a good man as A, B, or C should have so much trouble!’ or, when widespread calamities strike a community, standing aghast at the broad and dark shadows that fall upon a nation or a continent, and wondering what the meaning of all this heaped misery is, and why the world is thus allowed to run along its course surrounded by an

atmosphere made up of the breath of sighs, and swathed in clouds which are moist with tears.

My text gives us an illustration in the sharpest form of the mystery. 'After these things and this faithfulness, Sennacherib came'—and he always comes in one shape or another. For, to begin with, a good man's goodness does not lift him out of the ordinary associations and contingencies and laws of life. If he has inherited a diseased constitution, his devotion will not make him a healthy man. If he has little common sense, his godliness will not make him prosper in worldly affairs. If he is tied to unfortunate connections, he will have to suffer. If he happens to be in a decaying branch of business, his prayers will not make him prosperous. If he falls in the way of poisonous gas from a sewer, his godliness will not exempt him from an attack of fever. So all round the horizon we see this: that the godly man is involved like any other man in the ordinary contingencies and possible evils of life. Then, have we to say that God has nothing to do with these?

Again, Hezekiah's story teaches us how second causes are God's instruments, and He is at the back of everything. There are two sources of our knowledge of the history of Judah in the time with which we are concerned. One is the Bible, the other is the Assyrian monuments; and it is a most curious contrast to read the two narratives of the same events, agreeing about the facts, but disagreeing utterly in the spirit. Why? Because the one tells the story from the world's point of view, and the other tells it from God's point of view. So when you take the one narrative, it is simply this: 'There was a conspiracy down in the south against the political supremacy of Assyria, and a lot of

little confederate kinglets gathered themselves; and Hezekiah, of Judah, was one, along with So-and-So of such-and-such a petty land, and they leaned upon Egypt; and I, Sennacherib, came down among them, and they tumbled to pieces, and that is all.' Then the Bible comes in, and it says that God ordered all those political complications, and that they were all the working out of His purposes, and that 'the axe in His hand,' as Isaiah has it so picturesquely, was this proud king of Assyria, with his boastful mouth and vain-glorious words.

Now, that is the principle by which we have to estimate all the events that befall us. There are two ways of looking at them. You may look at them from the under side or from the top side. You may see them as they appear to men who cannot look beyond their noses and only have concern with the visible cranks and shafting, or you may look at them from the engine-room and take account of the invisible power that drives them all. In the one case you will regard it as a mystery that good men should have to suffer so; in the other case, you will say, 'It is the Lord, let Him do'—even when He does it through Sennacherib and his like, 'let Him do what seemeth Him good.'

Then there is another thing to be taken into account—that is, that the better a man is, the more faithful he is and the more closely he cleaves to God, and seeks, like this king, to do, with all his heart, all his work in the service of the House of God and to seek his God, the more sure is he to bring down upon himself certain forms of trouble and trial. The rebellion which, from the Assyrian side of the river, seemed to be a mere political revolt, from the Jordan side of the river

seemed to be closely connected with the religious reformation. And it was just because Hezekiah and his people came back to God that they rebelled against the King of Assyria and served him not. If you provoke Sennacherib, Sennacherib will be down upon you very quickly. That is to say, being translated, if you will live like Christian men and women and fling down the gage of battle to the world and to the evil that lies in every one of us, and say, 'No, I have nothing to do with you. My law is not your law, and, God helping me, my practice shall not be your practice,' then you will find out that the power that you have defied has a very long arm and a very tight grasp, and you will have to make up your minds that, in some shape or other, the old law will be fulfilled about you. Through much tribulation we must enter the Kingdom.

II. Now, secondly, my text and its context solve the mystery which it raises.

The chronicler, as I said, wishes us to notice the sequence, strange as it is, and to wonder at it for a moment, in order that we may be prepared the better to take in the grand explanation that follows. And the explanation lies in the facts that ensue.

Did Sennacherib come to destroy? By no means! Here were the results: first, a stirring to wholesome energy and activity. If annoyances and troubles and sorrows, great or small, do nothing else for us, they would be clear and simple gain if they woke us up, for the half of men pass half of their lives half-asleep. And anybody that has ever come through a great sorrow and can remember what deep fountains were opened in his heart that he knew nothing about before, and how powers that were all unsuspected by himself suddenly

came to him, and how life, instead of being a trivial succession of nothings, all at once became significant and solemn—any man who can remember that, will feel that if there were nothing else that his troubles did for him than to shake him out of torpor and rouse him to a tension of wholesome activity, so that he cried out:

‘Call forth thy powers, my soul! and dare
The conflict of unequal war,’

he would have occasion to bless God for the roughest handling. The tropics are very pleasant for lazy people, but they sap the constitution and make work impossible; and after a man has lived for a while in their perpetual summer, he begins to long for damp and mist and frost and east winds which bring bracing to the system and make him fit to work. God takes us often into very ungenial climates, and the vindication of it is that we may be set to active service. That was the first good thing that Sennacherib's coming did.

The next was that his invasion increased dependence upon God. You will remember the story of the insolent taunts and vulgar vaunting by him and his servants, and the one answer that was given: ‘Hezekiah, the king, and Isaiah the son of Amoz the prophet, prayed and cried to God.’ Ah! dear brethren, any thing that drives us to His breast is blessing. We may call it evil when we speak from the point of view of the foolish senses and the quivering heart, but if it blows us into His arms, any wind, the roughest and the fiercest, is to be welcomed more than lazy calms or gentle zephyrs. If, realising our own weakness and impotence, we are made to hang more completely upon

Him, then let us be thankful for whatever has been the means of such a blessed issue. That was the second good thing that Sennacherib did.

The third good thing that he—not exactly did—but that was done through him, was that experience of God's delivering power was enriched. You remember the miracle of the destruction of the army. I need not dilate upon it. A man who can look back and say, 'Thou hast been with me in six troubles,' need never be afraid of the seventh; and he who has hung upon that strong rope when he has been swinging away down in the darkness and asphyxiating atmosphere of the pit, and has been drawn up into the sunshine again, will trust it for all coming time. If there were no other explanation, the enlarged and deepened experience of the realities of God's Gospel and of God's grace, which are bought only by sorrow, would be a sufficient explanation of any sorrow that any of us have ever had to carry.

'Well roars the storm to him who hears
A deeper voice across the storm.'

There are large tracts of Scripture which have no meaning, no blessedness to us until they have been interpreted to us by losses and sorrows. We never know the worth of the lighthouse until the November darkness and the howling winds come down upon us, and then we appreciate its preciousness.

So, dear friends! the upshot of the whole is just that old teaching, that if we realised what life is for, we should wonder less at the sorrows that are in it. For life is meant to make us partakers of His holiness, not to make us happy. Our happiness is a secondary purpose, not out of view of the Divine love, but it is not

the primary one. And the direct intention and mission of sorrow, like the direct intention and mission of joy, are to further that great purpose, that we 'should be partakers of His holiness.' 'Every branch in Me that beareth fruit, He purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit.'

III. Lastly, my text suggests a warning against letting prosperity undo adversity's work.

Hezekiah came bravely through his trials. They did exactly what God wanted them to do; they drove him to God, they forced him down upon his knees. When Sennacherib's letter came, he took it to the Temple and spread it before God, and said, 'O Lord! it is Thy business. It is addressed to me, but it is meant for Thee; do Thou answer it.' And so he received the help that he wanted. But he broke down after that. He was 'exalted'; and the allies, his neighbours, that had not lifted a finger to help him when he needed their help, sent him presents which would have been a great deal more seasonable when he was struggling for his life with Sennacherib. What 'came after (God's) faithfulness'? This—'his heart was lifted up, and he rendered not according to the benefit rendered to him.' Therefore the blow had to come down again. A great many people take refuge in archways when it rains, and run out as soon as it holds up, and a great many people take religion as an umbrella, to put down when the sunshine comes. We cross the bridge and forget it, and when the leprosy is out of us we do not care to go back and give thanks. Sometimes too, we begin to think, 'After all, it was we that killed Sennacherib's army, and not the angel.' And so, like dull scholars, we need the lesson repeated once, twice, thrice, 'here a little and there a little, precept upon

precept, line upon line.' There is none of us that has so laid to heart our past difficulties and trials that it is safe for God to burn the rod as long as we are in this life.

Dear friends! do not let it be said of us, 'In vain have I smitten thy children. They have received no correction'; but rather let us keep close to Him, and seek to learn the sweet and loving meaning of His sharpest strokes. Then the little book, 'written within and without with lamentation and woe,' which we all in our turn have to absorb and make our own, may be 'bitter in the mouth,' but will be 'sweet as honey' thereafter.

MANASSEH'S SIN AND REPENTANCE

'So Manasseh made Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to err, and to do worse than the heathen, whom the Lord had destroyed before the children of Israel. 10. And the Lord spake to Manasseh, and to his people: but they would not hearken. 11. Wherefore the Lord brought upon them the captains of the host of the king of Assyria, which took Manasseh among the thorns, and bound him with fetters, and carried him to Babylon. 12. And when he was in affliction, he besought the Lord his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers, 13. And prayed unto him: and he was intreated of him, and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord He was God. 14. Now after this he built a wall without the city of David, on the west side of Gihon, in the valley, even to the entering in at the fish gate, and compassed about Ophel, and raised it up a very great height, and put captains of war in all the fenced cities of Judah. 15. And he took away the strange gods, and the idol out of the house of the Lord, and all the altars that he had built in the mount of the house of the Lord, and in Jerusalem, and cast them out of the city. 16. And he repaired the altar of the Lord, and sacrificed thereon peace offerings and thank offerings, and commanded Judah to serve the Lord God of Israel.'—2 CHRON. xxxiii. 9-16.

THE story of Manasseh's sin and repentance may stand as a typical example. Its historical authenticity is denied on the ground that it appears only in this Book of Chronicles. I must leave others to discuss that matter; my purpose is to bring out the teaching contained in the story.

The first point in it is the stern indictment against Manasseh and his people. The experience which has saddened many a humbler home was repeated in the royal house, where a Hezekiah was followed by a Manasseh, who scorned all that his father had worshipped, and worshipped all that his father had loathed. Happily the father's eyes were closed long before the idolatrous bias of his son could have disclosed itself. Succeeding to the throne at twelve years of age, he could not have begun his evil ways at once, and probably would have been preserved from them if his father had lived long enough to mould his character. A child of twelve, flung on to a throne, was likely to catch the infection of any sin that was in the atmosphere. The narrative specifies two points in which, as he matured in years, and was confirmed in his course of conduct, he went wrong: first, in his idolatry; and second, in his contempt of remonstrances and warnings. As to the former, the preceding context gives a terrible picture. He was smitten with a very delirium of idolatry, and wallowed in any and every sort of false worship. No matter what strange god was presented, there were hospitality, an altar, and an offering for him. Baal, Moloch, 'the host of heaven,' wizards, enchanters, anybody who pretended to have any sort of black art, all were welcome, and the more the better. No doubt, this eager acceptance of a miscellaneous multitude of deities was partly reaction from the monotheism of the former reign, but also it was the natural result of being surrounded by the worshippers of these various gods; and it was an unconscious confession of the insufficiency of each and all of them to fill the void in the heart, and satisfy the needs of the spirit. There are 'gods many, and lords

many,' because they are insufficient; 'the Lord our God is one Lord,' because He, in His single Self, is more than all these, and is enough for any and every man.

We may note, too, that at the beginning of the chapter Manasseh is said to have done '*like* unto the abominations of the heathen,' while in verse 9 he is said to have done '*evil more than did the nations.*' When a worshipper of Jehovah does *like* the heathen, he does *worse* than they. An apostate Christian is more guilty than one who has never '*tasted the good word of God,*' and is likely to push his sins to a more flagrant wickedness. '*The corruption of the best is the worst.*' We cannot do what the world does without being more deeply guilty than they.

The narrative lays stress on the fact that the king's inclination to idolatry was agreeable to the people. The kings, who fought against it, had to resist the popular current, but at the least encouragement from those in high places the nation was ready to slide back. Rulers who wish to lower the standard of morality or religion have an easy task; but the people who follow their lead are not free from guilt, though they can plead that they only followed. The second count in the indictment is the refusal of king and people to listen to God's remonstrances. 2 Kings, chap. xxi., gives the prophets' warnings at greater length. '*They would not hearken,*'—can anything madder and sadder be said of any of us than that? Is it not the very sin of sins, and the climax of suicidal folly, that God should call and men stop their ears? And yet how many of us pay no more regard to His voice, in His providences, in our own consciences, in history, in Scripture, and, most penetrating and beseeching of all, in Christ, than to idle wind whistling through an archway! Our own

evil deeds stop our ears, and the stopped ears make further evil deeds more easy.

The second step in this typical story is merciful chastisement, meant to secure a hearing for God's voice. 2 Kings tells the threat, but not the fulfilment; Chronicles tells the fulfilment, but not the threat. We note how emphatically God's hand is recognised behind the political complications which brought the Assyrians to Jerusalem, and how particularly it is stated that the invasion was not headed by Esarhaddon, but by his generals. The place of Manasseh's captivity also is specified, not as Nineveh, as might have been expected, but as Babylon. These details, especially the last, look like genuine history. It is history which carries a lesson. Here is one conspicuous instance of the divine method, which is working to-day as it did then. God's hand is behind the secondary causes of events. Our sorrows and 'misfortunes' are sent to us by Him, not hurled at us by human hands only, or occurring by the working of impersonal laws. They are meant to make us bethink ourselves, and drop evil things from our hands and hearts. It is best to be guided by His eye, and not need 'bit and bridle'; but if we make ourselves stubborn as 'the mule, which has no understanding,' it is second best that we should taste the whip, that it may bring us to run in harness on the road which He wills. If we habitually looked at calamities as His loving chastisement, intended to draw us to Himself, we should not have to stand perplexed so often at what we call the mysteries of His providence.

The next step in the story is the yielding of the sinful heart when smitten. The worst affliction is an affliction wasted, which does us no good. And God has often to

lament, 'In vain have I smitten your children; they received no correction.' Sorrow has in itself no power to effect the purpose for which it is sent; but all depends on how we take it. It sometimes makes us hard, bitter, obstinate in clinging to evil. A heart that has been disciplined by it, and still is undisciplined, is like iron hammered on an anvil, and made the more close-grained thereby. But this king took his chastisement wisely. An accepted sorrow is an angel in disguise, and nothing which drives us to God is a calamity. Manasseh praying was freer in his chains than ever he had been in his prosperity. Manasseh humbling himself greatly before God was higher than when, in the pride of his heart, he shut God out from it.

Affliction should clear our sight, that we may see ourselves as we are; and, if we do, there will be an end of high looks, and we shall 'take the lowest room.' Thus humbled, we shall pray as the self-confident and outwardly prosperous cannot do. Sorrow has done its best on us when, like some strong hand on our shoulders, it has brought us to our knees. No affliction has yielded its full blessing to us unless it has thus set us by Manasseh's side.

The next step in the story is the loving answer to the humbled heart, and the restoration to the kingdom. 'He was entreated of him.' No doubt, political circumstances brought about Manasseh's reinstatement, as they had brought about his captivity, but it was God that 'brought him again to his kingdom.' We may not receive again lost good things, but we may be quite sure that God never fails to hear the cry of the humble, and that, if there is one voice that more surely reaches His ear and moves His heart than another, it is the voice of His chastened children, who

cry to Him out of the depths, and there have learned their own sin and sore need. He will be entreated of them, and, whether He gives back lost good or not, He will give Himself, in whom all good is comprehended. Manasseh's experience may be repeated in us.

And the best part of it was, not that he received back his kingdom, but that 'then Manasseh knew that the Lord He was God.' The name had been but a name to him, but now it had become a reality. Our traditional, second-hand belief in God is superficial and largely unreal till it is deepened and vivified by experience. If we have cried to Him, and been lightened, then we have a ground of conviction that cannot be shaken. Formerly we could at most say, 'I believe in God,' or, 'I think there is a God,' but now we can say, 'I know,' and no criticism nor contradiction can shake that. Such knowledge is not the knowledge won by the understanding alone, but it is acquaintance with a living Person, like the knowledge which loving souls have of each other; and he who has that knowledge as the issue of his own experience may smile at doubts and questionings, and say with the Apostle of Love, 'We know that we are of God, . . . and we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know Him that is true.' Then, if we have that knowledge, we shall listen to the same Apostle's commandment, 'Keep yourselves from idols,' even as the issue of Manasseh's knowledge of God was that 'he took away the strange gods, and the idol out of the house of the Lord.'

JOSIAH

*** Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign, and he reigned in Jerusalem two and thirty years. 2. And he did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, and walked in the ways of David his father, and declined neither to the right hand, nor to the left. 3. For in the eighth year of his reign, while he was yet young, he began to seek after the God of David his father: and in the twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem from the high places, and the groves, and the carved images, and the molten images. 4. And they brake down the altars of Baalim in his presence; and the images, that were on high above them, he cut down; and the groves, and the carved images, and the molten images, he brake in pieces, and made dust of them, and strowed it upon the graves of them that had sacrificed unto them. 5. And he burnt the bones of the priests upon their altars, and cleansed Judah and Jerusalem. 6. And so did he in the cities of Manasseh, and Ephraim, and Simeon, even unto Naphtali, with their mattocks round about. 7. And when he had broken down the altars and the groves, and had beaten the graven images into powder, and cut down all the idols throughout all the land of Israel, he returned to Jerusalem. 8. Now in the eighteenth year of his reign, when he had purged the land, and the house, he sent Shaphan the son of Azaliah, and Maaseiah the governor of the city, and Joah the son of Joahaz the recorder, to repair the house of the Lord his God. 9. And when they came to Hilkiah the high priest, they delivered the money that was brought into the house of God, which the Levites that kept the doors had gathered of the hand of Manasseh and Ephraim, and of all the remnant of Israel, and of all Judah and Benjamin; and they returned to Jerusalem. 10. And they put it in the hand of the workmen that had the oversight of the house of the Lord, and they gave it to the workmen that wrought in the house of the Lord, to repair and amend the house: 11. Even to the artificers and builders gave they it, to buy hewn stone, and timber for couplings, and to floor the houses which the kings of Judah had destroyed. 12. And the men did the work faithfully: and the overseers of them were Jahath and Obadiah, the Levites, of the sons of Merari; and Zechariah and Meshullam, of the sons of the Kohathites, to set it forward; and other of the Levites, all that could skill of instruments of musick. 13. Also they were over the bearers of burdens, and were overseers of all that wrought the work in any manner of service: and of the Levites there were scribes, and officers, and porters.'**
2 CHRON. xxxiv. 1-13.

ANOTHER boy king, even younger than his grandfather Manasseh had been at his accession, and another reversal of the father's religion! These vibrations from idolatry to Jehovah-worship, at the pleasure of the king, sadly tell how little the people cared whom they worshipped, and how purely a matter of ceremonies and names both their idolatry and their Jehovah-worship were. The religion of the court was the religion of the nation, only idolatry was more congenial than the service of God. How far the child monarch Josiah had a deeper sense of what that service meant we cannot decide, but the little outline sketch of him in verses

2 and 3 is at least suggestive of his having it, and may well stand as a fair portrait of early godliness.

A child eight years old, who had been lifted on to the throne of a murdered father, must have had a strong will and a love of goodness to have resisted the corrupting influences of royalty in a land full of idols. Here again we see that, great as may be the power of circumstances, they do not determine character; for it is always open to us either to determine whether we yield to them or resist them. The prevailing idolatry influenced the boy, but it influenced him to hate it with all his heart. So out of the nettle danger we may pluck the flower safety. The men who have smitten down some evil institution have generally been brought up so as to feel its full force.

‘He did that which was right in the eyes of Jehovah’—that may mean simply that he worshipped Jehovah by outward ceremonies, but it probably means more; namely, that his life was pure and God-pleasing, or, as we should say, clean and moral, free from the foul vices which solicit a young prince. ‘He walked in the ways of David his father’—not being one of the ‘emancipated’ youths who think it manly to throw off the restraints of their fathers’ faith and morals. He ‘turned not aside to the right hand or to the left’—but marched right onwards on the road that conscience traced out for him, though tempting voices called to him from many a side-alley that seemed to lead to pleasant places. ‘While he was yet young, he began to seek after the God of David his father’—at the critical age of sixteen, when Easterns are older than we, in the flush of early manhood, he awoke to deeper experiences and felt the need for a closer touch of God. A career thus begun will generally prelude a life pure,

strenuous, and blessed with a clearer and clearer vision of the God who is always found of them that seek Him. Such a childhood, blossoming into such a boyhood, and flowering in such a manhood, is possible to every child among us. It will 'still bring forth fruit in old age.'

The two incidents which the passage narrates, the purging of the land and the repair of the Temple, are told in inverted order in 2 Kings, but the order here is probably the more accurate, as dates are given, whereas in 2 Kings, though the purging is related after the Temple restoration, it is not said to have occurred after. But the order is of small consequence. What is important is the fiery energy of Josiah in the work of destruction of the idols. Here, there, everywhere, he flames and consumes. He darts a flash even into the desolate ruins of the Israelitish kingdom, where the idols had survived their devotees and still bewitched the scanty fragments of Israel that remained. The altars of stone were thrown down, the wooden sun-pillars were cut to pieces, the metal images were broken and ground to powder. A clean sweep was made.

A dash of ferocity mingled with contempt appears in Josiah's scattering the 'dust' of the images on the graves of their worshippers, as if he said: 'There you lie together, pounded idols and dead worshippers, neither able to help the other!' The same feelings prompted digging up the skeletons of priests and burning the bones on the very altars that they had served, thus defiling the altars and executing judgment on the priests. No doubt there were much violence and a strong strain of the 'wrath of man' in all this. Iconoclasts are wont to be 'violent'; and men without convictions, or who are partisans of what the icono-

clasts are rooting out, are horrified at their want of 'moderation.' But though violence is always unchristian, indifference to rampant evils is not conspicuously more Christian, and, on the whole, you cannot throttle snakes in a graceful attitude or without using some force to compress the sinuous neck.

The restoration of the Temple comes after the cleansing of the land, in Chronicles, and naturally in the order of events, for the casting out of idols must always precede the building or repairing of the Temple of God. Destructive work is very poor unless it is for the purpose of clearing a space to build the Temple on. Happy the man or the age which is able to do both! Josiah and Joash worked at restoring the Temple in much the same fashion, but Josiah had a priesthood more interested than Joash had.

But we may note one or two points in his restoration. He had put his personal effort into the preparatory extirpation of idols, but he did not need to do so now. He could work this time by deputy. And it is noteworthy that he chose 'laymen' to carry out the restoration. Perhaps he knew how Joash had been balked by the knavery of the priests who were diligent in collecting money, but slow in spending it on the Temple. At all events, he delegated the work to three highly-placed officials, the secretary of state, the governor of Jerusalem, and the official historian.

It appears that for some time a collection had been going on for Temple repairs; probably it had been begun six years before, when the 'purging' of the land began. It had been carried on by the Levites, and had been contributed to even by 'the remnant of Israel' in the northern kingdom, who, in their forlorn weakness, had begun to feel the drawings of ancient brother-

hood and the tie of a common worship. This fund was in the keeping of the high priest, and the three commissioners were instructed to require it from him. Here 2 Kings is clearer than our passage, and shows that what the three officials had mainly to do was to get the money from Hilkiah, and to hand it over to the superintendents of the works.

There are two remarkable points in the narrative; one is the observation that 'the men did the work faithfully,' which comes in rather enigmatically here, but in 2 Kings is given as the reason why no accounts were kept. Not an example to be imitated, and the sure way to lead subordinates sooner or later to deal unfaithfully; but a pleasant indication of the spirit animating all concerned.

Surely these men worked 'as ever in the great Task-master's eye.' That is what makes us work faithfully, whether we have any earthly overseer or audit or no. Another noteworthy matter is that not only were the superintendents of the work—the 'contractors,' as we might say—Levites, but so were also the inferior superintendents, or, as we might say, 'foremen.'

And not only so, but they were those that 'were skilful with instruments of music.' What were musicians doing there? Did the building rise

'with the sound

Of dulcet symphonies and voices sweet?'

May we not gather from this singular notice the great thought that for all rearing of the true Temple, harps of praise are no less necessary than swords or trowels, and that we shall do no right work for God or man unless we do it as with melody in our hearts? Our lives must be full of music if we are to lay even one stone in the Temple.

JOSIAH AND THE NEWLY FOUND LAW

'And when they brought out the money that was brought into the house of the Lord, Hilkiah the priest found a book of the law of the Lord given by Moses. 15. And Hilkiah answered and said to Shaphan the scribe, I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord. And Hilkiah delivered the book to Shaphan. 16. And Shaphan carried the book to the king, and brought the king word back again, saying, All that was committed to thy servants, they do it. 17. And they have gathered together the money that was found in the house of the Lord, and have delivered it into the hand of the overseers, and to the hand of the workmen. 18. Then Shaphan the scribe told the king, saying, Hilkiah the priest hath given me a book. And Shaphan read it before the king. 19. And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the law, that he rent his clothes. 20. And the king commanded Hilkiah, and Ahikam the son of Shaphan, and Abdon the son of Micah, and Shaphan the scribe, and Asaiah a servant of the king's, saying, 21. Go, enquire of the Lord for me, and for them that are left in Israel and in Judah, concerning the words of the book that is found: for great is the wrath of the Lord that is poured out upon us, because our fathers have not kept the word of the Lord, to do after all that is written in this book. 22. And Hilkiah, and they that the king had appointed, went to Huldah the prophetess, the wife of Shallum the son of Tikvath, the son of Hasrah, keeper of the wardrobe; (now she dwelt in Jerusalem in the college;) and they spake to her to that effect. 23. And she answered them, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Tell ye the man that sent you to me. 24. Thus saith the Lord, Behold, I will bring evil upon this place, and upon the inhabitants thereof, even all the curses that are written in the book which they have read before the king of Judah: 25. Because they have forsaken Me, and have burned incense unto other gods, that they might provoke Me to anger with all the works of their hands; therefore My wrath shall be poured out upon this place, and shall not be quenched. 26. And as for the king of Judah, who sent you to enquire of the Lord, so shall ye say unto him, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel concerning the words which thou hast heard; 27. Because thine heart was tender, and thou didst humble thyself before God, when thou heardest His words against this place, and against the inhabitants thereof, and humbledst thyself before Me, and didst rend thy clothes, and weep before Me; I have even heard thee also, saith the Lord. 28. Behold, I will gather thee to thy fathers, and thou shalt be gathered to thy grave in peace, neither shall thine eyes see all the evil that I will bring upon this place, and upon the inhabitants of the same. So they brought the king word again.'—2 CHRON. xxxiv. 14-28.

ABOUT one hundred years separated Hezekiah's restoration from Josiah's. Neither was more than a momentary arrest of the strong tide running in the opposite direction; and Josiah's was too near the edge of the cataract to last, or to avert the plunge. There is nothing more tragical than the working of the law which often sets the children's teeth on edge by reason of the fathers' eating of sour grapes.

I. The first point in this passage is the discovery of the book of the Law.

The book had been lost before it was found. For how long we do not know, but the fact that it had been so carelessly kept is eloquent of the indifference of priests and kings, its appointed guardians. Law-breakers have a direct interest in getting rid of law-books, just as shopkeepers who use short yardsticks and light weights are not anxious the standards should be easily accessible. If we do not make God's law our guide, we shall wish to put it out of sight, that it may not be our accuser. What more sad or certain sign of evil can there be than that we had rather not 'hear what God the Lord will speak'?

The straightforward story of our passage gives a most natural explanation of the find. Hilkiab was likely to have had dark corners cleared out in preparation for repairs and in storing the subscriptions, and many a mislaid thing would turn up. If it be possible that the book of the Law should have been neglected (and the religious corruption of the last hundred years makes that only too certain), its discovery in some dusty recess is very intelligible, and would not have been doubted but for the exigencies of a theory. 'Reading between the lines' is fascinating, but risky; for the reader is very likely unconsciously to do what Hilkiab is said to have done—namely, to invent what he thinks he finds.

Accepting the narrative as it stands, we may see in it a striking instance of the indestructibleness of God's Word. His law is imperishable, and its written embodiment seems as if it, too, had a charmed life. When we consider the perils attending the transmission of ancient manuscripts, the necessary scarcity of copies before the invention of printing, the scattering of the Jewish people, it does appear as if a divine

hand had guarded the venerable book. How came this strange people, who never kept their Law, to swim through all their troubles, like Cæsar with his commentaries between his teeth, bearing aloft and dry, the Word which they obeyed so badly? 'Write it . . . in a book, that it may be for the time to come for ever and ever.' The permanence of the written Word, the providence that has watched over it, the romantic history of its preservation through ages of neglect, and the imperishable gift to the world of an objective standard of duty, remaining the same from age to age, are all suggested by this reappearance of the forgotten Law.

It may suggest, too, that honest efforts after reformation are usually rewarded by clearer knowledge of God's will. If Hilkiâh had not been busy in setting wrong things right, he would not have found the book in its dark hiding-place. We are told that the coincidence of the discovery at the nick of time is suspicious. So it is, if you do not believe in Providence. If you do, the coincidence is but one instance of His sending gifts of the right sort at the right moment. It is not the first time nor the last that the attempt to keep God's law has led to larger knowledge of the law. It is not the first time nor the last that God has sent to His faithful servants an opportune gift. What the world calls accidental coincidence deeper wisdom discerns to be the touch of God's hand.

Again, the discovery reminds us that the true basis of all religious reform is the Word of God. Josiah had begun to restore the Temple, but he did not know till he heard the Law read how great the task was which he had taken in hand. That recovered book gave impulse and direction to his efforts. The nearest

parallel is the rediscovery of the Bible in the sixteenth century, or, if we may take one incident as a symbol of the whole, Luther's finding the dusty Latin Bible among the neglected convent books. The only reformation for an effete or secularised church is in its return to the Bible. Faded flowers will lift up their heads when plunged in water. The old Bible, discovered and applied anew, must underlie all real renovation of dead or moribund Christianity.

II. The next point here is the effect of the rediscovered Law. Shaphan was closely connected with Josiah, as his office made him a confidant. It is ordinarily taken for granted that he and the other persons named in this lesson formed a little knot of earnest Jehovah worshippers, fully sympathising with the Reformation, and that among them lay the authorship of the book. But we know nothing about them except what is told here and in the parallel in Kings. One of them, Ahikam, was a friend and protector of Jeremiah, and Shaphan the scribe was the father of another of Jeremiah's friends. They may all have been in accord with the king, or they may not.

At all events, Shaphan took the book to Josiah. We can picture the scene—the deepening awe of both men as the whole extent of the nation's departure from God became clearer and clearer, the tremulous tones of the reader, and the silent, fixed attention of the listener as the solemn threatenings came from Shaphan's reluctant, pallid lips. There was enough in them to touch a harder heart than Josiah's. We cannot suppose that, knowing the history of the past, and being sufficiently enlightened to 'seek after the God of David his father,' he did not know in a general way that sin meant sorrow, and national disobedience

national death. But we all have the faculty of blunting the cutting edge of truth, especially if it has been familiar, so that some novelty in the manner of its presentation, or even its repetition without novelty sometimes, may turn commonplace and impotent truth into a mighty instrument to shake and melt.

So it seems to have been with Josiah. Whether new or old, the Word found him as it had never done before. The venerable copy from which Shaphan read, the coincidence of its discovery just then, the dishonour done to it for so long, may all have helped the impression. However it arose, it was made. If a man will give God's Word a fair hearing, and be honest with himself, it will bring him to his knees. No man rightly uses God's law who is not convinced by it of his sin, and impelled to that self-abased sorrow of which the rent royal robes were the passionate expression. Josiah was wise when he did not turn his thoughts to other people's sins, but began with his own, even whilst he included others. The first function of the law is to arouse the knowledge of sin, as Paul profoundly teaches. Without that penitent knowledge religion is superficial, and reformation merely external. Unless we 'abhor ourselves, and repent in dust and ashes,' Scripture has not done its work on us, and all our reading of it is in vain. Nor is there any good reason why familiarity with it should weaken its power. But, alas! it too often does. How many of us would stand in awe of God's judgments if we heard them for the first time, but listen to them unmoved, as to thunder without lightning, merely because we know them so well! That is a reason for attending to them, not for neglecting.

Josiah's sense of sin led him to long for a further

word from God; and so he called these attendants named in verse 20, and sent them to 'enquire of the Lord . . . concerning the words of the book.' What more did he wish to know? The words were plain enough, and their application to Israel and him indubitable. Clearly, he could only wish to know whether there was any possibility of averting the judgments, and, if so, what was the means. The awakened conscience instinctively feels that threatenings cannot be God's last words to it, but must have been given that they might not need to be fulfilled. We do not rightly sorrow for sin unless it quickens in us a desire for a word from God to tell us how to escape. The Law prepares for the Gospel, and is incomplete without it. 'The soul that sinneth, it shall die,' cannot be all which a God of pity and love has to say. A faint promise of life lies in the very fact of threatening death, faint indeed, but sufficient to awaken earnest desire for yet another word from the Lord. We rightly use the solemn revelations of God's law when we are driven by them to cry, 'What must I do to be saved?'

III. So we come to the last point, the double-edged message of the prophetess. Josiah does not seem to have told his messengers where to go; but they knew, and went straight to a very unlikely person, the wife of an obscure man, only known as his father's son. Where was Jeremiah of Anathoth? Perhaps not in the city at the time. There had been prophetesses in Israel before. Miriam, Deborah, the wife of Isaiah, are instances of 'your daughters' prophesying; and this embassy to Huldah is in full accord with the high position which women held in that state, of which the framework was shaped by God Himself. In Christ

Jesus 'there is neither male nor female,' and Judaism approximated much more closely to that ideal than other lands did.

Huldah's message has two parts: one the confirmation of the threatenings of the Law; one the assurance to Josiah of acceptance of his repentance and gracious promise of escape from the coming storm. These two are precisely equivalent to the double aspect of the Gospel, which completes the Law, endorsing its sentence and pointing the way of escape.

Note that the former part addresses Josiah as 'the man that sent you,' but the latter names him. The embassy had probably not disclosed his name, and Huldah at first keeps up the veil, since the personality of the sender had nothing to do with her answer; but when she comes to speak of pardon and God's favour, there must be no vagueness in the destination of the message, and the penitent heart must be tenderly bound up by a word from God straight to itself. The threatenings are general, but each single soul that is sorry for sin may take as its very own the promise of forgiveness. God's great 'Whosoever' is for me as certainly as if my name stood on the page.

The terrible message of the inevitableness of the destruction hanging over Jerusalem is precisely parallel with the burden of all Jeremiah's teaching. It was too late to avert the fall. The external judgments must come now, for the emphasis of the prophecy is in its last words, it 'shall not be quenched.' But that did not mean that repentance was too late to alter the whole character of the punishment, which would be fatherly chastisement if meekly accepted. So, too, Jeremiah taught, when he exhorted submission to the 'Chaldees.' It is never too late to seek mercy, though

It may be too late to hope for averting the outward consequences of sin.

As for Josiah, his penitence was accepted, and he was assured that he would be gathered to his fathers. That expression, as is clear from the places where it occurs, is not a synonym for either death or burial, from both of which it is distinguished, but is a dim promise of being united, beyond the grave, with the fathers, who, in some one condition, which we may call a place, are gathered into a restful company, and wander no more as pilgrims and sojourners in this lonely and changeful life.

Josiah died in battle. Was that going to his grave in peace? Surely yes! if, dying, he felt God's presence, and in the darkness saw a great light. He who thus dies, though it be in the thick of battle, and with his heart's blood pouring from an arrow-wound down on the floor of the chariot, dies in peace, and into peace.

THE FALL OF JUDAH

'Zedekiah was one and twenty years old when he began to reign, and reigned eleven years in Jerusalem. 12. And he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord his God, and humbled not himself before Jeremiah the prophet speaking from the mouth of the Lord. 13. And he also rebelled against king Nebuchadnezzar, who had made him swear by God: but he stiffened his neck, and hardened his heart from turning unto the Lord God of Israel. 14. Moreover all the chief of the priests, and the people, transgressed very much after all the abominations of the heathen; and polluted the house of the Lord which he had balled in Jerusalem. 15. And the Lord God of their fathers sent to them by His messengers, rising up betimes, and sending; because He had compassion on His people, and on His dwelling-place: 16. But they mocked the messengers of God, and despised His words, and misused His prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against His people, till there was no remedy. 17. Therefore he brought upon them the king of the Chaldees, who slew their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion upon young man or maiden, old man, or him that stooped for age: he gave them all into his hand. 18. And all the vessels of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the Lord, and the treasures of the king, and of his princes; all these he brought to Babylon. 19. And they burnt the house of God, and brake down the wall of Jerusalem, and burnt all the palaces thereof with fire, and destroyed all the goodly vessels thereof. 20. And them that had escaped from the sword carried he away to Babylon; where the

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were servants to him and his sons until the reign of the kingdom of Persia : 21. To fulfil the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed her sabbaths : for as long as she lay desolate she kept sabbath, to fulfil threescore and ten years.'—2 CHRON. xxxvi. 11-21.

BIGNESS is not greatness, nor littleness smallness. Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of Judah was, in his eyes, one of the least important of his many victories, but it is the only one of them which survives in the world's memory and keeps his name as a household word. The Jews were a mere handful, and their country a narrow strip of land between the desert and the sea; but little Judæa, like little Greece, has taught the world. The tragedy of its fall has importance quite disproportioned to its apparent magnitude. Our passage brings together Judah's sin and Judah's punishment, and we shall best gather the lessons of its fall by following the order of the text.

Consider the sin. There is nothing more remarkable than the tone in which the chronicler, like all the Old Testament writers, deals with the national sin. Patriotic historians make it a point of pride and duty to gloss over their country's faults, but these singular narrators paint them as strongly as they can. Their love of their country impels them to 'make known to Israel its transgression and to Judah its sin.' There are tears in their eyes, as who can doubt? But there is no faltering in their voices as they speak. A higher feeling than misguided 'patriotism' moves them. Loyalty to Israel's God forces them to deal honestly with Israel's sin. That is the highest kind of love of country, and might well be commended to loud-mouthed 'patriots' in modern lands.

Look at the piled-up clauses of the long indictment of Judah in verses 12 to 16. Slow, passionless, unsparing, the catalogue enumerates the whole black list.

It is like the long-drawn blast of the angel of judgment's trumpet. Any trace of heated emotion would have weakened the impression. The nation's sin was so crimson as to need no heightening of colour. With like judicial calmness, with like completeness, omitting nothing, does 'the book,' which will one day be opened, set down every man's deeds, and he will be 'judged according to the things that are written in this book.' Some of us will find our page sad reading.

But the points brought out in this indictment are instructive. Judah's idolatry and 'trespass after all the abominations of the heathen' is, of course, prominent, but the spirit which led to their idolatry, rather than the idolatry itself, is dwelt on. Zedekiah's doing 'evil in the sight of the Lord' is regarded as aggravated by his not humbling himself before Jeremiah, and the head and front of his offending is that 'he stiffened his neck and hardened his heart from turning unto the Lord.' Similarly, the people's sin reaches its climax in their 'mocking' and 'scoffing' at the prophets and 'despising' God's words by them. So then, an evil life has its roots in an alienated heart, and the source of all sin is an obstinate self-will. That is the sulphur-spring from which nothing but unwholesome streams can flow, and the greatest of all sins is refusing to hear God's voice when He speaks to us.

Further, this indictment brings out the patient love of God seeking, in spite of all their deafness, to find a way to the sinners' ears and hearts. In a bold transference to Him of men's ways, He is said to have 'risen early' to send the prophets. Surely that means earnest effort. The depths of God's heart are disclosed when we are bidden to think of His compassion as the

motive for the prophet's messages and threatenings. What a wonderful and heart-melting revelation of God's placableness, wistful hoping against hope, and reluctance to abandon the most indurated sinner, is given in that centuries-long conflict of the patient God with treacherous Israel! That divine charity suffered long and was kind, endured all things and hoped all things.

Consider the punishment. The tragic details of the punishment are enumerated with the same completeness and suppression of emotion as those of the sin. The fact that all these were divine judgments brings the chronicler to the Psalmist's attitude. 'I was dumb, I opened not my mouth because Thou didst it.' Sorrow and pity have their place, but the awed recognition of God's hand outstretched in righteous retribution must come first. Modern sentimentalists, who are so tender-hearted as to be shocked at the Christian teachings of judgment, might learn a lesson here.

The first point to note is that a time arrives when even God can hope for no amendment and is driven to change His methods. His patience is not exhausted, but man's obstinacy makes another treatment inevitable. God lavished benefits and pleadings for long years in vain, till He saw that there was 'no remedy.' Only then did He, as if reluctantly forced, do 'His work, His strange work.' Behold, therefore, the 'goodness and severity' of God, goodness in His long delay, severity in the final blow, and learn that His purpose is the same though His methods are opposite.

To the chronicler God is the true Actor in human affairs. Nebuchadnezzar thought of his conquest as won by his own arm. Secular historians treat the fall of Zedekiah as simply the result of the political con-

ditions of the time, and sometimes seem to think that it could not be a divine judgment because it was brought about by natural causes. But this old chronicler sees deeper, and to him, as to us, if we are wise, 'the history of the world is the judgment of the world.' The Nebuchadnezzars are God's axes with which He hews down fruitless trees. They are responsible for their acts, but they are His instruments, and it is His hand that wields them.

The iron band that binds sin and suffering is disclosed in Judah's fall. We cannot allege that the same close connection between godlessness and national disaster is exemplified now as it was in Israel. Nor can we contend that for individuals suffering is always the fruit of sin. But it is still true that 'righteousness exalteth a nation,' and that 'by the soul only are the nations great,' in the true sense of the word. To depart from God is always 'a bitter and an evil thing' for communities and individuals, however sweet draughts of outward prosperity may for a time mask the bitterness. Not armies nor fleets, not ships, colonies and commerce, not millionaires and trusts, not politicians and diplomatists, but the fear of the Lord and the keeping of His commandments, are the true life of a nation. If Christian men lived up to the ideal set them by Jesus, 'Ye are the salt of the land,' and sought more earnestly and wisely to leaven their nation, they would be doing more than any others to guarantee its perpetual prosperity.

The closing words of this chapter, not included in the passage, are significant. They are the first words of the Book of Ezra. Whoever put them here perhaps wished to show a far-off dawn following the stormy sunset. He opens a 'door of hope' in 'the valley of

trouble.' It is an Old Testament version of 'God hath not cast away His people whom He foreknew.' It throws a beam of light on the black last page of the chronicle, and reveals that God's chastisement was in love, that it was meant for discipline, not for destruction, that it was educational, and that the rod was burned when the lesson had been learned. It was learned, for the Captivity cured the nation of hankering after idolatry, and whatever defects it brought back from Babylon, it brought back a passionate abhorrence of all the gods of the nations.

EZRA

THE EVE OF THE RESTORATION

'Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, 2. Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and He hath charged me to build Him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. 3. Who is there among you of all His people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel (He is the God), which is in Jerusalem. 4. And whosoever remaineth in any place where he sojourneth, let the men of his place help him with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts, besides the freewill offering for the house of God that is in Jerusalem. 5. Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, with all them whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem. 6. And all they that were about them strengthened their hands with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, and with beasts, and with precious things, besides all that was willingly offered. 7. Also Cyrus the king brought forth the vessels of the house of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought forth out of Jerusalem, and had put them in the house of his gods; 8. Even those did Cyrus king of Persia bring forth by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and numbered them unto Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah. 9. And this is the number of them: thirty chargers of gold, a thousand chargers of silver, nine and twenty knives, 10. Thirty basons of gold, silver basons of a second sort four hundred and ten, and other vessels a thousand. 11. All the vessels of gold and of silver were five thousand and four hundred. All these did Sheshbazzar bring up with them of the captivity that were brought up from Babylon unto Jerusalem.'

—EZRA I. 1-11.

CYRUS captured Babylon 538 B.C., and the 'first year' here is the first after that event. The predicted seventy years' captivity had nearly run out, having in part done their work on the exiles. Colours burned in on china are permanent; and the furnace of bondage had, at least, effected this, that it fixed monotheism for ever in the inmost substance of the Jewish people. But the bulk of them seem to have had little of either religious or patriotic enthusiasm, and preferred Babylonia to Judea. We are here told of the beginning of the return

of a portion of the exiles—forty-two thousand, in round numbers.

‘The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus.’ That unveils the deepest cause of what fell into place, to the superficial observers, as one among many political events of similar complexion. We find among the inscriptions a cylinder written by order of Cyrus, which shows that he reversed the Babylonian policy of deporting conquered nations. ‘All their peoples,’ says he, in reference to a number of nations of whom he found members in exile in Babylonia, ‘I assembled and restored to their lands and the gods . . . whom Nabonidos . . . had brought into Babylon, I settled in peace in their sanctuaries’ (Sayce, *Fresh Light from the Ancient Monuments*, p. 148). It was, then, part of a wider movement, which sent back Zerubbabel and his people to Jerusalem, and began the rebuilding of the Temple. No doubt, Cyrus had seen that the old plan simply brought an element of possible rebellion into the midst of the country, and acted on grounds of political prudence.

But our passage digs deeper to find the true cause. Cyrus was God’s instrument, and the statesman’s insight was the result of God’s illumination. The divine causality moves men, when they move themselves. It was not only in the history of the chosen people that God’s purpose is wrought out by more or less conscious and willing instruments. The principle laid down by the writer of this book is of universal application, and the true ‘philosophy of history’ must recognise as underlying all other so-called causes and forces the one uncaused Cause, of whose purposes kings and politicians are the executants, even while they freely act according to their own judgments, and, it may be,

in utter unconsciousness of Him. It concerns our tranquillity and hopefulness, in the contemplation of the bewildering maze and often heart-breaking tragedy of mundane affairs, to hold fast by the conviction that God's unseen Hand moves the pieces on the board, and presides over all the complications. The difference between 'sacred' and 'profane' history is not that one is under His direct control, and the other is not. What was true of Cyrus and his policy is as true of England. Would that politicians and all men recognised the fact as clearly as this historian did!

I. Cyrus's proclamation sounds as if he were a Jehovah-worshipper, but it is to be feared that his religion was of a very accommodating kind. It used to be said that, as a Persian, he was a monotheist, and would consequently be in sympathy with the Jews; but the same cylinder already quoted shatters that idea, and shows him to have been a polytheist, ready to worship the gods of Babylon. He there ascribes his conquest to 'Merodach, the great lord,' and distinctly calls himself that god's 'worshipper.' Like other polytheists, he had room in his pantheon for the gods of other nations, and admitted into it the deities of the conquered peoples.

The use of the name 'Jehovah' would, no doubt, be most simply accounted for by the supposition that Cyrus recognised the sole divinity of the God of Israel; but that solution conflicts with all that is known of him, and with his characterisation in Isaiah xlv. as 'not knowing' Jehovah. More probably, his confession of Jehovah as the God of heaven was consistent in his mind with a similar confession as to Bel-Merodach or the supreme god of any other of the

conquered nations. There is, however no improbability in the supposition that the prophecies concerning him in Isaiah xlv. may have been brought to his knowledge, and be referred to in the proclamation as the 'charge' given to him to build Jehovah's Temple. But we must not exaggerate the depth or exclusiveness of his belief in the God of the Jews.

Cyrus's profession of faith, then, is an example of official and skin-deep religion, of which public and individual life afford plentiful instances in all ages and faiths. If we are to take their own word for it, most great conquerors have been very religious men, and have asked a blessing over many a bloody feast. All religions are equally true to cynical politicians, who are ready to join in worshipping 'Jehovah, Jove, or Lord,' as may suit their policy. Nor is it only in high places that such loosely worn professions are found. Perhaps there is no region of life in which insincerity, which is often quite unconscious, is so rife as in regard to religious belief. But unless my religion is everything, it is nothing. 'All in all, or not at all,' is the requirement of the great Lover of souls. What a winnowing of chaff from wheat there would be, if that test could visibly separate the mass which is gathered on His threshing-floor, the Church!

Cyrus's belief in Jehovah illustrates the attitude which was natural to a polytheist, and is so difficult for us to enter into. A vague belief in One Supreme, above all other gods, and variously named by different nations, is buried beneath mountains of myths about lesser gods, but sometimes comes to light in many pagan minds. This blind creed, if creed it can be called, is joined with the recognition of deities belonging to each nation, whose worship is to be co-extensive

with the race of which they are patrons, and who may be absorbed into the pantheon of a conqueror, just as a vanquished king may be allowed an honourable captivity at the victor's capital. Thus Cyrus could in a sense worship Jehovah, the God of Israel, without thereby being rebellious to Merodach.

There are people, even among so-called Christians, who try the same immoral and impossible division of what must in its very nature be wholly given to One Supreme. To 'serve God and mammon' is demonstrably an absurd attempt. The love and trust and obedience which are worthy of Him must be whole-hearted, whole-souled, whole-willed. It is as impossible to love God with part of one's self as it is for a husband to love his wife with half his heart, and another woman with the rest. To divide love is to slay it. Cyrus had some kind of belief in Jehovah; but his own words, so wonderfully recovered in the inscription already referred to, proved that he had not listened to the command, 'Him only shalt thou serve.' That command grips us as closely as it did the Jews, and is as truly broken by thousands calling themselves Christians as by any idolaters.

The substance of the proclamation is a permission to return to any one who wished to do so, a sanction of the rebuilding of the Temple, and an order to the native inhabitants to render help in money, goods, and beasts. A further contribution towards the building was suggested as 'a free-will offering.' The return, then, was not to be at the expense of the king, nor was any tax laid on for it; but neighbourly goodwill, born of seventy years of association, was invoked, and, as we find, not in vain. God had given the people favour in the eyes of those who had carried them captive.

II. The long years of residence in Babylonia had weakened the homesickness which the first generation of captives had, no doubt, painfully experienced, and but a small part of them cared to avail themselves of the opportunity of return. One reason is frankly given by Josephus: 'Many remained in Babylon, not wishing to leave their possessions behind them.' 'The heads of the fathers' houses [who may have exercised some sort of government among the captives], the priests and Levites,' made the bulk of the emigrants; but in each class it was only those 'whose spirit God had stirred up' (as he had done Cyrus) that were devout or patriotic enough to face the wrench of removal and the difficulties of repeopling a wasted land. There was nothing to tempt any others, and the brave little band had need of all their fortitude. But no heart in which the flame of devotion burned, or in which were felt the drawings of that passionate love of the city and soil where God dwelt (which in the best days of the nation was inseparable from devotion), could remain behind. The departing contingent, then, were the best part of the whole; and the lingerers were held back by love of ease, faint-heartedness, love of wealth, and the like ignoble motives.

How many of us have had great opportunities offered for service, which we have let slip in like manner! To have doors opened which we are too lazy, too cowardly, too much afraid of self-denial, to enter, is the tragedy and the crime of many a life. It is easier to live among the low levels of the plain of Babylon, than to take to the dangers and privations of the weary tramp across the desert. The ruins of Jerusalem are a much less comfortable abode than the well-furnished houses which have to be left. Prudence says, 'Be con-

tent where you are, and let other people take the trouble of such mad schemes as rebuilding the Temple.' A thousand excuses sing in our ears, and we let the moment in which alone some noble resolve is possible slide past us, and the rest of life is empty of another such. Neglected opportunities, unobeyed calls to high deeds, we all have in our lives. The saddest of all words is, 'It might have been.' How much wiser, happier, nobler, were the daring souls that rose to the occasion, and flung ease and wealth and companionship behind them, because they heard the divine command couched in the royal permission, and humbly answered, 'Here am I; send me'!

III. The third point in the passage is singular—the inventory of the Temple vessels returned by Cyrus. As to its particulars, we need only note that Sheshbazzar is the same as Zerubbabel; that the exact translation of some of the names of the vessels is doubtful; and that the numbers given under each head do not correspond with the sum total, the discrepancy indicating error somewhere in the numbers.

But is not this dry enumeration a strange item to come in the forefront of the narrative of such an event? We might have expected some kind of production of the enthusiasm of the returning exiles, some account of how they were sent on their journey, something which we should have felt worthier of the occasion than a list of bowls and nine-and-twenty knives. But it is of a piece with the whole of the first part of this Book of Ezra, which is mostly taken up with a similar catalogue of the members of the expedition. The list here indicates the pride and joy with which the long hidden and often desecrated vessels were received. We can see the priests and Levites

gazing at them as they were brought forth, their hearts, and perhaps their eyes, filling with sacred memories. The Lord had 'turned again the captivity of Zion,' and these sacred vessels lay there, glittering before them, to assure them that they were not as 'them that dream.' Small things become great when they are the witnesses of a great thing.

We must remember, too, how strong a hold the externals of worship had on the devout Jew. His faith was much more tied to form than ours ought to be, and the restoration of the sacrificial implements as a pledge of the re-establishment of the Temple worship would seem the beginning of a new epoch of closer relation to Jehovah. It is almost within the lifetime of living men that all Scotland was thrilled with emotion by the discovery, in a neglected chamber, of a chest in which lay, forgotten, the crown and sceptre of the Stuarts. A like wave of feeling passed over the exiles as they had given back to their custody these Temple vessels. Sacreder ones are given into our hands, to carry across a more dangerous desert. Let us hear the charge, 'Be ye clean, that bear the vessels of the Lord,' and see that we carry them, untarnished and unlost, to 'the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem.'

ALTAR AND TEMPLE

'And when the seventh month was come, and the children of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered themselves together as one man to Jerusalem. 2. Then stood up Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brethren the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and his brethren, and builded the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings thereon, as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God. 3. And they set the altar upon his bases; for fear was upon them because of the people of those countries: and they offered burnt offerings thereon unto the Lord, even burnt offerings morning and evening. 4. They kept also the feast of tabernacles, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number, according to the custom, as the duty of every day required; 5. And afterward offered the continual

burnt offering, both of the new moons, and of all the set feasts of the Lord that were consecrated, and of every one that willingly offered a freewill offering unto the Lord. 6. From the first day of the seventh month began they to offer burnt offerings unto the Lord. But the foundation of the Temple of the Lord was not yet laid. 7. They gave money also unto the masons, and to the carpenters; and meat, and drink, and oil, unto them of Zidon, and to them of Tyre, to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea of Joppa, according to the grant that they had of Cyrus king of Persia. 8. Now in the second year of their coming unto the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, began Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and the remnant of their brethren the priests and the Levites, and all they that were come out of the captivity unto Jerusalem; and appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to set forward the work of the house of the Lord. 9. Then stood Jeshua with his sons and his brethren, Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, together, to set forward the workmen in the house of God: the sons of Henadad, with their sons and their brethren the Levites. 10. And when the builders laid the foundation of the Temple of the Lord, they set the priests in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the Lord, after the ordinance of David king of Israel. 11. And they sang together by course in praising and giving thanks unto the Lord; because He is good, for His mercy endureth for ever toward Israel. And all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. 12. But many of the priests and Levites and chief of the fathers, who were ancient men, that had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice; and many shouted aloud for joy: 13. So that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people: for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the noise was heard afar off.—EZRA iii. 1-13.

WHAT an opportunity of 'picturesque' writing the author of this book has missed by his silence about the incidents of the march across the dreary levels from Babylon to the verge of Syria! But the very silence is eloquent. It reveals the purpose of the book, which is to tell of the re-establishment of the Temple and its worship. No doubt the tone of the whole is somewhat prosaic, and indicative of an age in which the externals of worship bulked largely; but still the central point of the narrative was really the centre-point of the events. The austere simplicity of biblical history shows the real points of importance better than more artistic elaboration would do.

This passage has two main incidents—the renewal of the sacrifices, and the beginning of rebuilding the Temple.

The date given in verse 1 is significant. The first day of the seventh month was the commencement of the

great festival of tabernacles, the most joyous feast of the year, crowded with reminiscences from the remote antiquity of the Exodus, and from the dedication of Solomon's Temple. How long had passed since Cyrus' decree had been issued we do not know, nor whether his 'first year' was reckoned by the same chronology as the Jewish year, of which we here arrive at the seventh month. But the journey across the desert must have taken some months, and the previous preparations could not have been suddenly got through, so that there can have been but a short time between the arrival in Judea and the gathering together 'as one man to Jerusalem.'

There was barely interval enough for the returning exiles to take possession of their ancestral fields before they were called to leave them unguarded and hasten to the desolate city. Surely their glad and unanimous obedience to the summons, or, as it may even have been, their spontaneous assemblage unsummoned, is no small token of their ardour of devotion, even if they were somewhat slavishly tied to externals. It would take a good deal to draw a band of new settlers in our days to leave their lots and set to putting up a church before they had built themselves houses.

The leaders of the band of returned exiles demand a brief notice. They are Jeshua, or Joshua, and Zerubbabel. In verse 2 the ecclesiastical dignitary comes first, but in verse 8 the civil. Similarly in Ezra ii. 2, Zerubbabel precedes Jeshua. In Haggai, the priest is pre-eminent; in Zechariah the prince. The truth seems to be that each was supreme in his own department, and that they understood each other cordially, or, Zechariah says, 'the counsel of peace' was 'between them both.' It is sometimes bad for the people when

priests and rulers lay their heads together; but it is even worse when they pull different ways, and subjects are torn in two by conflicting obligations.

Jeshua was the grandson of Seraiah, the unfortunate high-priest whose eyes Nebuchadnezzar put out after the fall of Jerusalem. His son Jozadak succeeded to the dignity, though there could be no sacrifices in Babylon, and after him his son Jeshua. He cannot have been a young man at the date of the return; but age had not dimmed his enthusiasm, and the high-priest was where he ought to have been, in the forefront of the returning exiles. His name recalls the other Joshua, likewise a leader from captivity and the desert; and, if we appreciate the significance attached to names in Scripture, we shall scarcely suppose it accidental that these two, who had similar work to do, bore the same name as the solitary third, of whom they were pale shadows, the greater Joshua, who brings His people from bondage into His own land of peace, and builds the Temple.

Zerubbabel ('Sown in Babylon') belonged to a collateral branch of the royal family. The direct Davidic line through Solomon died with the wretched Zedekiah and Jeconiah, but the descendants of another son of David's, Nathan, still survived. Their representative was one Salathiel, who, on the failure of the direct line, was regarded as the 'son of Jeconiah' (1 Chron. iii. 17). He seems to have had no son, and Zerubbabel, who was really his nephew (1 Chron. iii. 19), was legally adopted as his son. In this makeshift fashion, some shadow of the ancient royalty still presided over the restored people. We see Zerubbabel better in Haggai and Zechariah than in Ezra, and can discern the outline of a strong, bold, prompt nature. He had a hard

task, and he did it like a man. Patient, yet vigorous, glowing with enthusiasm, yet clear-eyed, self-forgetful, and brave, he has had scant justice done him, and ought to be a very much more familiar and honoured figure than he is. 'Who art thou, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel thou shalt become a plain.' Great mountains only become plains before men of strong wills and fixed faith.

There is something very pathetic in the picture of the assembled people groping amid the ruins on the Temple hill, to find 'the bases,' the half-obliterated outlines, of the foundations of the old altar of burnt offerings. What memories of Araunah's threshing-floor, and of the hovering angel of destruction, and of the glories of Solomon's dedication, and of the long centuries during which the column of smoke had gone up continually from that spot, and of the tragical day when the fire was quenched, and of the fifty years of extinction, must have filled their hearts! What a conflict of gladness and sorrow must have troubled their spirits as the flame again shot upwards from the hearth of God, cold for so long!

But the reason for their so quickly rearing the altar is noteworthy. It was because 'fear was upon them because of the people of the countries.' The state of the Holy Land at the return must be clearly comprehended. Samaria and the central district were in the hands of bitter enemies. Across Jordan in the east, down on the Philistine plain in the west, and in the south where Edom bore sway, eager enemies sulkily watched the small beginnings of a movement which they were interested in thwarting. There was only the territory of Judah and Benjamin left free for the exiles, and they had reason for their fears; for their

neighbours knew that if restitution was to be the order of the day, they would have to disgorge a good deal. What was the defence against such foes which these frightened men thought most impregnable? That altar!

No doubt, much superstition mingled with their religion. Haggai leaves us under no illusions as to their moral and spiritual condition. They were no patterns of devoutness or of morality. But still, what they did carries an eternal truth; and they were reverting to the original terms of Israel's tenure of their land when they acted on the conviction that their worship of Jehovah according to His commandment was their surest way of finding shelter from all their enemies. There are differences plain enough between their condition and ours; but it is as true for us as ever it was for them, that our safety is in God, and that, if we want to find shelter from impending dangers, we shall be wiser to betake ourselves to the altar and sit suppliant there than to make defences for ourselves. The ruined Jerusalem better guarded by that altar than if its fallen walls had been rebuilt.

The whole ritual was restored, as the narrative tells with obvious satisfaction in the enumeration. To us this punctilious attention to the minutiae of sacrificial worship sounds trivial. But we equally err if we try to bring such externalities into the worship of the Christian Church, and if we are blind to their worth at an earlier stage.

There cannot be a temple without an altar, but there may be an altar without a temple. God meets men at the place of sacrifice, even though there be no house for His name. The order of events here teaches us what is essential for communion with God. It is the

altar. Sacrifice laid there is accepted, whether it stand on a bare hill-top, or have round it the courts of the Lord's house.

The second part of the passage narrates the laying of the foundations of the Temple. There had been contracts entered into with masons and carpenters, and arrangements made with the Phœnicians for timber, as soon as the exiles had returned; but of course some time elapsed before the stone and timber were sufficient to make a beginning with. Note in verse 7 the reference to Cyrus' grant as enabling the people to get these stores together. Whether the whole preparations, or only the transport of cedar wood, is intended to be traced to the influence of that decree, there seems to be a tacit contrast, in the writer's mind, with the glorious days when no heathen king had to be consulted, and Hiram and Solomon worked together like brothers. Now, so fallen are we, that Tyre and Sidon will not look at us unless we bring Cyrus' rescript in our hands!

If the 'years' in verses 1 and 8 are calculated from the same beginning, some seven months were spent in preparation, and then the foundation was laid. Two things are noted—the humble attempt at making some kind of a display on the occasion, and the conflict of feeling in the onlookers. They had managed to get some copies of the prescribed vestments; and the narrator emphasises the fact that the priests were 'in their apparel,' and that the Levites had cymbals, so that some approach to the pomp of Solomon's dedication was possible. They did their best to adhere to the ancient prescriptions, and it was no mere narrow love of ritual that influenced them. However we may breathe a freer air of worship, we cannot but sympa-

thine with that earnest attempt to do everything 'according to the order of David king of Israel.' Not only punctiliousness as to ritual, but the magnetism of glorious memories, prescribed the reproduction of that past. Rites long proscribed become very sacred, and the downtrodden successors of mighty men will cling with firm grasp to what the greater fathers did.

The ancient strain which still rings from Christian lips, and bids fair to be as eternal as the mercies which it hymns, rose with strange pathos from the lips of the crowd on the desolate Temple mountain, ringed about by the waste solitudes of the city: 'For He is good, for His mercy endureth for ever toward Israel.' It needed some faith to sing that song then, even with the glow of return upon them. What of all the weary years? What of the empty homesteads, and the surrounding enemies, and the brethren still in Babylon? No doubt some at least of the rejoicing multitude had learned what the captivity was meant to teach, and had come to bless God, both for the long years of exile, which had burned away much dross, and for the incomplete work of restoration, surrounded though they were with foes, and little as was their strength to fight. The trustful heart finds occasion for unmingled praise in the most mingled cup of joy and sorrow.

There can have been very few in that crowd who had seen the former Temple, and their memories of its splendour must have been very dim. But partly remembrance and partly hearsay made the contrast of the past glories and the present poverty painful. Hence that pathetic and profoundly significant incident of the blended shouts of the young and tears of the old. One can fancy that each sound jarred on the ears of those who uttered the other. But each was wholly

natural to the years of the two classes. Sad memories gather, like evening mists, round aged lives, and the temptation of the old is unduly to exalt the past, and unduly to depreciate the present. Welcoming shouts for the new befit young lips, and they care little about the ruins that have to be carted off the ground for the foundations of the temple which they are to have a hand in building. However imperfect, it is better to them than the old house where the fathers worshipped.

But each class should try to understand the other's feelings. The friends of the old should not give a churlish welcome to the new, nor those of the new forget the old. It is hard to blend the two, either in individual life or in a wider sphere of thought or act. The seniors think the juniors revolutionary and irreverent; the juniors think the seniors fossils. It is possible to unite the shout of joy and the weeping. Unless a spirit of reverent regard for the past presides over the progressive movements of this or any day, they will not lay a solid foundation for the temple of the future. We want the old and the young to work side by side, if the work is to last and the sanctuary is to be ample enough to embrace all shades of character and tendencies of thought. If either the grey beards of Solomon's court or the hot heads of Rehoboam's get the reins in their hands, they will upset the chariot. That mingled sound of weeping and joy from the Temple hill tells a more excellent way.

BUILDING IN TROUBLOUS TIMES

'Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the children of the captivity builded the temple unto the Lord God of Israel ; 2. Then they came to Zerubbabel, and to the chief of the fathers, and said unto them, Let us build with you : for we seek your God, as ye do ; and we do sacrifice unto Him since the days of Esar-haddon king of Assur, which brought us up hither. 3. But Zerubbabel, and Jeshua, and the rest of the chief of the fathers of Israel, said unto them, Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God ; but we ourselves together will build unto the Lord God of Israel, as king Cyrus the king of Persia hath commanded us. 4. Then the people of the land weakened the hands of the people of Judah, and troubled them in building, 5. And hired counsellors against them, to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.'—EZRA iv. 1-5.

OPPOSITION began as soon as the foundations were laid, as is usually the case with all great attempts to build God's house. It came from the Samaritans, the mingled people who were partly descendants of the ancient remnant of the northern kingdom, left behind after the removal by deportation of the bulk of its population, and partly the descendants of successive layers of immigrants, planted in the empty territory by successive Assyrian and Babylonian kings. Esar-haddon was the first who had sent colonists, about one hundred and thirty years before the return. The writer calls the Samaritans 'the adversaries,' though they began by offers of friendship and alliance. The name implies that these offers were perfidious, and a move in the struggle.

One can easily understand that the Samaritans looked with suspicion on the new arrivals, the ancient possessors of the land, coming under the auspices of the new dynasty, and likely to interfere with their position if not reduced to inferiority or neutralised somehow. The proposal to unite in building the Temple was a political move ; for, in old-world ideas, co-operation in Temple-building was incorporation in

national unity. The calculation, no doubt, was that if the returning exiles could be united with the much more numerous Samaritans, they would soon be absorbed in them. The only chance for the smaller body was to keep itself apart, and to run the risk of its isolation.

The insincere request was based on an untruth, for the Samaritans did not worship Jehovah as the Jews, but along with their own gods (2 Kings xvii. 25-41). To divide His dominion with others was to dethrone Him altogether. It therefore became an act of faithfulness to Jehovah to reject the entangling alliance. To have accepted it would have been tantamount to frustrating the very purpose of the return, and consenting to be muzzled about the sin of idolatry. But the chief lesson which exile had burned in on the Jewish mind was a loathing of idolatry, which is in remarkable contrast to the inclination to it that had marked their previous history. So one answer only was possible, and it was given with unwelcome plainness of speech, which might have been more courteous, and not less firm. It flatly denied any common ground; it claimed exclusive relation to 'our God,' which meant, 'not yours'; it underscored the claim by reiterating that Jehovah was the 'God of Israel'; it put forward the decree of Cyrus, as leaving no option but to confine the builders to the people whom it had empowered to build.

Now, it is easy to represent this as a piece of impolitic narrowness, and to say that its surly bigotry was rightly punished by the evils that it brought down on the returning exiles. The temper of much flaccid Christianity at present delights to expand in a lazy and foolish 'liberality,' which will welcome any-

body to come and take a hand at the building, and accepts any profession of unity in worship. But there is no surer way of taking the earnestness out of Christian work and workers than drafting into it a mass of non-Christians, whatever their motives may be. Cold water poured into a boiling pot will soon stop its bubbling, and bring down its temperature. The churches are clogged and impeded, and their whole tone lowered and chilled, by a mass of worldly men and women. Nothing is gained, and much is in danger of being lost, by obliterating the lines between the church and the world. The Jew who thought little of the difference between the Samaritan worship with its polytheism, and his own monotheism, was in peril of dropping to the Samaritan level. The Samaritan who was accepted as a true worshipper of Jehovah, though he had a bevy of other gods in addition, would have been confirmed in his belief that the differences were unimportant. So both would have been harmed by what called itself 'liberality,' and was in reality indifference.

No doubt, Zerubbabel had counted the cost of faithfulness, and he soon had to pay it. The would-be friends threw off the mask, and, as they could not hinder by pretending to help, took a plainer way to stop progress. All the weapons that Eastern subtlety and intrigue could use were persistently employed to 'weaken the hands' of the builders, and the most potent of all methods, bribery to Persian officials, was freely used. The opponents triumphed, and the little community began to taste the bitterness of high hopes disappointed and noble enterprises frustrated. How differently things had turned out from the expectations with which the company had set forth

from Babylon! The rough awakening to realities disillusioned us all when we come to turn dreams into facts. The beginning of laying the Temple foundations is put in 536 B.C.; the first year of Darius was 522. How soon after the commencement of the work the Samaritan tricks succeeded we do not know, but it must have been some time before the death of Cyrus in 529. For weary years then the sanguine band had to wait idly, and no doubt enthusiasm died out: they had enough to do in keeping themselves alive, and in holding their own amidst enemies. They needed, as we all do, patience, and a willingness to wait for God's own time to fulfil His own promise.

THE NEW TEMPLE AND ITS WORSHIP

'And the elders of the Jews builded, and they prospered through the prophecy-
ing of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo: and they builded, and
finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to
the commandment of Cyrus, and Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia. 15. And this
house was finished on the third day of the month Adar, which was in the sixth
year of the reign of Darius the king. 16. And the children of Israel, the priests, and
the Levites, and the rest of the children of the captivity, kept the dedication of
this house of God with joy, 17. And offered at the dedication of this house of God an
hundred bullocks, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs; and for a sin offering
for all Israel, twelve he-goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel. 18.
And they set the priests in their divisions, and the Levites in their courses, for the
service of God, which is at Jerusalem; as it is written in the book of Moses. 19. And
the children of the captivity kept the passover upon the fourteenth day of the
first month. 20. For the priests and the Levites were purified together, all of them
were pure, and killed the passover for all the children of the captivity, and for
their brethren the priests, and for themselves. 21. And the children of Israel, which
were come again out of captivity, and all such as had separated themselves unto
them from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the Lord God of Israel,
did eat, 22. And kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy: for the
Lord had made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria unto
them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.'

—EZRA. vi. 14-22.

THERE are three events recorded in this passage,—the completion of the Temple, its dedication, and the keeping of the passover some weeks thereafter. Four years intervene between the resumption of building and its

successful finish, much of which time had been occupied by the interference of the Persian governor, which compelled a reference to Darius, and resulted in his confirmation of Cyrus' charter. The king's stringent orders silenced opposition, and seem to have been loyally, however unwillingly, obeyed. About twenty-three years passed between the return of the exiles and the completion of the Temple.

I. The prosperous close of the long task (vers. 14, 15). The narrative enumerates three points in reference to the completion of the Temple which are very significant, and, taken together, set forth the stimulus and law and helps of work for God.

It is expressive of deep truth that first in order is named, as the cause of success, 'the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah.' 'Practical men,' no doubt, then as always, set little store by the two prophets' fiery words, and thought that a couple of masons would have done more for the building than they did. The contempt for 'ideas' is the mark of shallow and vulgar minds. Nothing is more practical than principles and motives which underlie and inform work, and these two prophets did more for building the Temple by their words than an army of labourers with their hands. 'There are diversities of operations,' and it is not given to every man to handle a trowel; but no good work will be prosperously accomplished unless there be engaged in it prophets who rouse and rebuke and hearten, and toilers who by their words are encouraged and saved from forgetting the sacred motives and great ends of their work in the monotony and multiplicity of details.

Still more important is the next point mentioned. The work was done 'according to the commandment

of the God of Israel.' There is peculiar beauty and pathos in that name, which is common in Ezra. It speaks of the sense of unity in the nation, though but a fragment of it had come back. There was still an Israel, after all the dreary years, and in spite of present separation. God was still its God, though He had hidden His face for so long. An inextinguishable faith, wistful but assured, in His unalterable promise, throbs in that name, so little warranted by a superficial view of circumstances, but so amply vindicated by a deeper insight. His 'commandment' is at once the warrant and the standard for the work of building. In His service we are to be sure that He bids, and then to carry out His will whoever opposes.

We are to make certain that our building is 'according to the pattern showed in the mount,' and, if so, to stick to it in every point. There is no room for more than one architect in rearing the temple. The working drawings must come from Him. We are only His workmen. And though we may know no more of the general plan of the structure than the day-labourer who carries a hod does, we must be sure that we have His orders for our little bit of work, and then we may be at rest even while we toil. They who build according to His commandment build for eternity, and their work shall stand the trial by fire. That motive turns what without it were but 'wood, hay, stubble,' into 'gold and silver and precious stones.'

The last point is that the work was done according to the commandment of the heathen kings. We need not discuss the chronological difficulty arising from the mention of Artaxerxes here. The only king of that name who can be meant reigned fifty years after the events here narrated. The mention of him here has

been explained by 'the consideration that he contributed to the maintenance, though not to the building, of the Temple.' Whatever is the solution, the intention of the mention of the names of the friendly monarchs is plain. 'The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord as the watercourses; He turneth it whithersoever He will.' The wonderful providence, surpassing all hopes, which gave the people 'favour in the eyes of them that carried them captive,' animates the writer's thankfulness, while he recounts that miracle that the commandment of God was re-echoed by such lips. The repetition of the word in both clauses underscores, as it were, the remarkable concurrence.

II. The dedication of the Temple (vers. 16-18). How long the dedication was after the completion is not specified. The month Adar was the last of the Jewish year, and corresponded nearly with our March. Probably the ceremonial of dedication followed immediately on the completion of the building. Probably few, if any, of the aged men, who had wept at the founding, survived to see the completion of the Temple. A new generation had no such sad contrasts of present lowliness and former glory to shade their gladness. So many dangers surmounted, so many long years of toil interrupted and hope deferred, gave keener edge to joy in the fair result of them all.

We may cherish the expectation that our long tasks, and often disappointments, will have like ending if they have been met and done in like spirit, having been stimulated by prophets and commanded by God. It is not wholesome nor grateful to depreciate present blessings by contrasting them with vanished good. Let us take what God gives to-day, and not embitter it by remembering yesterday with vain regret. There is a

remembrance of the former more splendid Temple in the name of the new one, which is thrice repeated in the passage,—‘this house.’ But that phrase expresses gratitude quite as much as, or more than, regret. The former house is gone, but there is still ‘this house,’ and it is as truly God’s as the other was. Let us grasp the blessings we have, and be sure that in them is continued the substance of those we have lost.

The offerings were poor, if compared with Solomon’s ‘two and twenty thousand oxen, and an hundred and twenty thousand sheep’ (1 Kings viii. 63), and no doubt the despisers of the ‘day of small things,’ whom Zechariah had rebuked, would be at their depreciating work again. But ‘if there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not.’ The thankfulness of the offerers, not the number of their bullocks and rams, made the sacrifice well pleasing. But it would not have been so if the exiles’ resources had been equal to the great King’s. How many cattle had they in their stalls at home, not how many they brought to the Temple, was the important question. The man who says, ‘Oh! God accepts small offerings,’ and gives a mite while he keeps talents, might as well keep his mite too; for certainly God will not have it.

A significant part of the offerings was the ‘twelve he-goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel.’ These spoke of the same confidence as we have already noticed as being expressed by the designation of ‘the God of Israel.’ Possibly scattered members of all the tribes had come back, and so there was a kind of skeleton framework of the nation present at the dedication; but, whether that be so or not, that handful of people was not Israel. Thousands of their

brethren still lingered in exile, and the hope of their return must have been faint. Yet God's promise remained, and Israel was immortal. The tribes were still twelve, and the sacrifices were still theirs. A thrill of emotion must have touched many hearts as the twelve goats were led up to the altar. So an Englishman feels as he looks at the crosses on the Union Jack.

But there was more than patriotism in that sacrifice. It witnessed to unshaken faith. And there was still more expressed in it than the offerers dreamed; for it prophesied of that transformation of the national into the spiritual Israel, in virtue of which the promises remain true, and are inherited by the Church of Christ in all lands.

The re-establishment of the Temple worship with the appointment of priests and Levites, according to the ancient ordinance, naturally followed on the dedication.

III. The celebration of the Passover (vers. 19-22). It took place on the fourteenth day of the first month, and probably, therefore, very soon after the dedication. They 'kept the feast, . . . for the priests and Levites were purified together.' The zeal of the sacerdotal class in attending to the prescriptions for ceremonial purity made it possible that the feast should be observed. How much of real devotion, and how much of mere eagerness to secure their official position, mingled with this zeal, cannot be determined. Probably there was a touch of both. Scrupulous observance of ritual is easy religion, especially if one's position is improved by it. But the connection pointed out by the writer is capable of wide applications. The true purity and earnestness of preachers and teachers of

all degrees has much to do with their hearers' and scholars' participation in the blessings of the Gospel. If priests are not pure, they cannot kill the passover. Earnest teachers make earnest scholars. Foul hands cannot dispense the bread of life.

There is a slight deviation from the law in the ritual as here stated, since it was prescribed that each householder should kill the passover lamb for his house. But from the time of Hezekiah the Levites seem to have done it for the congregation (2 Chron. xxx. 17), and afterwards for the priests also (2 Chron. xxxv. 11, 14).

Verse 21 tells that not only the returned exiles, but also 'all such as had separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the Lord God of Israel,' ate the passover. It may be questioned whether these latter were Israelites, the descendants of the residue who had not been deported, but who had fallen into idolatry during the exile, or heathens of the mixed populations who had been settled in the vacant country. The emphasis put on their turning to Israel and Israel's God seems to favour the latter supposition. But in any case, the fact presents us with an illustration of the proper effect of the presence anywhere of a company of God's true worshippers. If we purify ourselves, and keep the feast of the true passover with joy as well as purity, we shall not want for outsiders who will separate themselves from the more subtle and not less dangerous idolatries of modern life, to seek the Lord God of Israel. If His Israel is what it ought to be, it will attract. A bit of scrap-iron in contact with a magnet is a magnet. They who live in touch with Him who said, 'I will draw all men unto Me' will share His

attractive power in the measure of their union with Him.

The week after the passover feast was, according to the ritual, observed as the feast of unleavened bread. The narrative touches lightly on the ceremonial, and dwells in conclusion on the joy of the worshippers and its cause. They do well to be glad whom God makes glad. All other joy bears in it the seeds of death. It is, in one aspect, the end of God's dealings, that we should be glad in Him. Wise men will not regard that as a less noble end than making us pure; in fact, the two are united. The 'blessed God' is glad in our gladness when it is His gladness.

Notice the exulting wonder with which God's miracle of mercy is reported in its source and its glorious result. The heart of the king was turned to them, and no power but God's could have done that. The issue of that divine intervention was the completed Temple, in which once more the God of that Israel which He had so marvellously restored dwelt in the midst of His people.

GOD THE JOY-BRINGER

'They kept the feast . . . seven days with joy; for the Lord had made them joyful.'—EZRA vi. 22.

TWENTY years of hard work and many disappointments and dangers had at last, for the Israelites returning from the captivity, been crowned by the completion of the Temple. It was a poor affair as compared with the magnificent house that had stood upon Zion; and so some of them 'despised the day of small things.' They were ringed about by enemies.

they were feeble in themselves; there was a great deal to darken their prospects and to sadden their hearts; and yet, when memories of the ancient days came back, and once more they saw the sacrificial smoke rising from the long cold and ruined altar, they rejoiced in God, and they kept the passover amid the ruins, as my text tells us, for the 'seven days' of the statutory period 'with joy,' because, in spite of all, 'the Lord had made them joyful.'

I think if we take this simple saying we get two or three thoughts, not altogether irrelevant to universal experience, about the true and the counterfeit gladnesses possible to us all.

I. Look at that great and wonderful thought—God the joy-maker.

We do not often realise how glad God is when we are glad, and how worthy an object of much that He does is simply the prosperity and the blessedness of human hearts. The poorest creature that lives has a right to ask from God the satisfaction of its instincts, and every man has a claim on God—because he is God's creature—to make him glad. God honours all cheques legitimately drawn on Him, and answers all claims, and regards Himself as occupied in a manner entirely congruous with His magnificence and His infinitude, when He stoops to put some kind of vibrating gladness into the wings of a gnat that dances for an hour in the sunshine, and into the heart of a man that lives his time for only a very little longer.

God is the Joy-maker. There are far more magnificent and sublime thoughts about Him than that; but I do not know that there is any that ought to come nearer to our hearts, and to silence more of our grumblings and of our distrust, than the belief that

the gladness of His children is an end contemplated by Him in all that He does. Whether we think it of small importance or no, He does not think it so, that all mankind should rejoice in Himself. And this is a marvellous revelation to break out of the very heart of that comparatively hard system of ancient Judaism. 'The Lord hath made them joyful.'

Turning away from the immediate connection of these words, let me remind you of the great outlines of the divine provision for gladdening men's hearts. I was going to say that God had only one way of making us glad; and perhaps that is in the deepest sense true. That way is by putting Himself into us. He gives us Himself to make us glad; for nothing else will do it—or, at least, though there may be many subordinate sources of joy, if there be in the innermost shrine of our spirits an empty place, where the Shekinah ought to shine, no other joys will suffice to settle and to rejoice the soul. The secret of all true human well-being is close communion with God; and when He looks at the poorest of us, desiring to make us blessed, He can but say, 'I will give Myself to that poor man; to that ignorant creature; to that wayward and prodigal child; to that harlot in her corruption; to that worldling in his narrow godlessness; I will give Myself, if they will have Me.' And thus, and only thus, does He make us truly, perfectly, and for ever glad.

Besides that, or rather as a sequel and consequence of that, there come such other God-given blessings as these to which my text refers. What were the outward reasons for the restored exiles' gladness? 'The Lord had made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king . . . unto them to strengthen their

hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.'

So, then, He pours into men's lives by His providences the secondary and lower gifts which men, according to changing circumstances, need; and He also satisfies the permanent physical necessities of all orders of beings to whom He has given life. He gives Himself for the spirit; He gives whatever is contributory to any kind of gladness; and if we are wise we shall trace all to Him. He is the Joy-giver; and that man has not yet understood either the sanctity of life or the full sweetness of its sweetest things unless he sees, written over every one of them, the name of God, their giver. Your common mercies are His love tokens, and they all come to us, just as the gifts of parents to their children do, with this on the fly-leaf, 'With a father's love.' Whatever comes to God's child with that inscription, surely it ought to kindle a thrill of gladness. That 'the king of Assyria's heart is turned'; shall we thank the king of Assyria? Yes and No! For it was God who 'turned' it. Oh! to carry the quiet confidence of that thought into all our daily life, and see His name written upon everything that contributes to make us blessed. God is the true Source and Maker of every joy.

And by the side of that we must put this other thought—there are sources of joy with which He has nothing to do. There are people who are joyful—and there are some of them listening now—not because God made them joyful, but because 'the world, the devil, and the flesh' have given them ghastly caricatures of the true gladness. And these rival sources of blessedness, the existence of which my text suggests, are the enemies of all that is good and noble in us and

in our joys. God made these men joyful, and so their gladness was wholesome.

II. Note the consequent obligation and wisdom of taking our God-given joys.

'They kept the feast with joy, for the Lord had made them joyful.' Then it is our obligation to accept and use what it is His blessedness to give. Be sure you take Him. When He is waiting to pour all His love into your heart, and all His sweetness into your sensitive spirit, to calm your anxieties, to deepen your blessedness, to strengthen everything that is good in you, to be to you a stay in the midst of crumbling prosperity, and a Light in the midst of gathering darkness, be sure that you take the joy that waits your acceptance. Do not let it be said that, when the Lord Christ has come down from heaven, and lived upon earth, and gone back to heaven, and sent His Spirit to dwell in you, you lock the door against the entrance of the joy-bringing Messenger, and are sad and restless and discontented because you have shut out the God who desires to abide in your hearts.

'They kept the feast with joy, because the Lord had made them joyful.' Oh! how many Christian men and women there are, who in the midst of the abundant and wonderful provision for continual cheerfulness and buoyancy of spirit given to them in the promises of the Gospel, in the gifts of Christ, in the indwelling of the Divine Spirit, do yet go through life creeping and sad, burdened and anxious, perplexed and at their wits' end, just because they will not have the God who yearns to come to them, or at least will not have Him in anything like the fullness and the completeness in which He desires to bestow Himself. If God gives, surely we are bound to receive. It is an obligation

upon Christian men and women, which they do not sufficiently realise, to be glad, and it is a commandment needing to be reiterated. 'Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say, rejoice.' Would that Christian experience in this generation was more alive to the obligation and the blessedness of perpetual joy arising from perpetual communion with Him.

Further, another obligation is to recognise Him in all common mercies, because He is at the back of them all. Let them always proclaim Him to us. Oh! if we did not go through the world blinded to the real Power that underlies all its motions, we should feel that everything was vocal to us of the loving-kindness of our Father in heaven. Link Him, dear friend! with everything that makes your heart glad; with everything pleasant that comes to you. There is nothing good or sweet but it flows from Him. There is no common delight of flesh or sense, of sight or taste or smell, no little enjoyment that makes the moment pass more brightly, no drop of oil that eases the friction of the wheels of life, but it may be elevated into greatness and nobleness, and will then first be understood in its true significance, if it is connected with Him. God does not desire to be put away high up on a pedestal above our lives, as if He regulated the great things and the trifles regulated themselves; but He seeks to come, as air into the lungs, into every particle of the mass of life, and to fill it all with His own purifying presence.

Recognise Him in common joys. If, when we sit down to partake of them, we would say to ourselves, 'The Lord has made us joyful,' all our home delights, all our social pleasures, all our intellectual and all our sensuous ones—rest and food and drink and all other

goods for the body—they would all be felt to be great, as they indeed are. Enjoyed in Him, the smallest is great; without Him, the greatest is small. ‘The Lord made them joyful’; and what is large enough for Him to give ought not to be too small for us to receive with recognition of His hand.

Another piece of wholesome counsel in this matter is—Be sure that you use the joys which God does give. Many good people seem to think that it is somehow devout and becoming to pitch most of their songs in a minor key, and to be habitually talking about trials and disappointments, and ‘a desert land,’ and ‘Brief life is here our portion,’ and so on, and so on. There are two ways in which you can look at the world and at everything that befalls you. There is enough in everybody’s life to make him sad if he sulkily selects these things to dwell upon. There is enough in everybody’s life to make him continually glad if he wisely picks out these to think about. It depends altogether on the angle at which you look at your life what you see in it. For instance, you know how children do when they get a bit of a willow wand into their possession. They cut off rings of bark, and get the switch alternately white and black, white and black, and so on right away to the tip. Whether will you look at the white rings or the black ones? They are both there. But if you rightly look at the black you will find out that there is white below it, and it only needs a very little stripping off of a film to make it into white too. Or, to put it into simpler words, no Christian man has the right to regard anything that God’s Providence brings to him as such unmingled evil that it ought to make him sad. We are bound to ‘rejoice in the Lord always.’

I know how hard it is, but sure am I that it is possible for a man, if he keeps near Jesus Christ, to reproduce Paul's paradox of being 'sorrowful yet always rejoicing,' and even in the midst of darkness and losses and sorrows and blighted hopes and disappointed aims to rejoice in the Lord, and to 'keep the feast with gladness, because the Lord has made him joyful.' Nor do we discharge our duty, unless side by side with the sorrow which is legitimate, which is blessed, strengthening, purifying, calming, moderating, there is also 'joy unspeakable and full of glory.'

Again, be sure that you limit your delights to God-made joys. Too many of us have what parts of our nature recognise as satisfaction, and are glad to have, apart from Him. There is nothing sadder than the joys that come into a life, and do not come from God. Oh! let us see to it that we do not fill our cisterns with poisonous sewage when God is waiting to fill them with the pure 'river of the water of life.' Do not let us draw our blessedness from the world and its evils. Does my joy help me to come near to God? Does it interfere with my communion with Him? Does it aid me in the consecration of myself? Does my conscience go with it when my conscience is most awake? Do I recognise Him as the Giver of the thing that is so blessed? If we can say Yes! to these questions, we can venture to believe that our blessedness comes from God, and leads to God, however homely, however sensuous and material may be its immediate occasion. But if not, then the less we have to do with such sham gladness the better. 'Even in laughter the heart is sorrowful, and the end of that mirth is heaviness.' The alternative presented for the choice of each of us is whether we will have surface joy and a centre of

dark discontent, or surface sorrow and a centre of calm blessedness. The film of stagnant water on a pond full of rottenness simulates the glories of the rainbow, in which pure sunshine falls upon the pure drops, but it is only painted corruption after all, a sign of rotting; and if a man puts his lips to it it will kill him. Such is the joy which is apart from God. It is the 'crackling of thorns under a pot'—the more fiercely they burn the sooner they are ashes. And, on the other hand, 'these things have I spoken unto you that My joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full.'

It is not 'for seven days' that we 'keep the feast' if God has 'made us joyful,' but for all the rest of the days of time, and for the endless years of the calm gladnesses of the heavens.

HEROIC FAITH

'I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy in the way: because we had spoken unto the king, saying, The hand of our God is upon them all for good that seek Him. . . . 23. So we fasted and besought our God for this. . . . 31. The hand of our God was upon us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way. 32. And we came to Jerusalem.'—EZRA viii. 22, 23, 31, 32.

THE memory of Ezra the scribe has scarcely had fairplay among Bible-reading people. True, neither his character nor the incidents of his life reach the height of interest or of grandeur belonging to the earlier men and their times. He is no hero, or prophet; only a scribe; and there is a certain narrowness as well as a prosaic turn about his mind, and altogether one feels that he is a smaller man than the Elijahs and Davids of the older days. But the

homely garb of the scribe covered a very brave devout heart, and the story of his life deserves to be more familiar to us than it is.

This scrap from the account of his preparations for the march from Babylon to Jerusalem gives us a glimpse of a high-toned faith, and a noble strain of feeling. He and his company had a long weary journey of four months before them. They had had little experience of arms and warfare, or of hardships and desert marches, in their Babylonian homes. Their caravan was made unwieldy and feeble by the presence of a large proportion of women and children. They had much valuable property with them. The stony desert, which stretches unbroken from the Euphrates to the uplands on the east of Jordan, was infested then as now by wild bands of marauders, who might easily swoop down on the encumbered march of Ezra and his men, and make a clean sweep of all which they had. And he knew that he had but to ask and have an escort from the king that would ensure their safety till they saw Jerusalem. Artaxerxes' surname, 'the long-handed,' may have described a physical peculiarity, but it also expressed the reach of his power; his arm could reach these wandering plunderers, and if Ezra and his troop were visibly under his protection, they could march secure. So it was not a small exercise of trust in a higher Hand that is told us here so simply. It took some strength of principle to abstain from asking what it would have been so natural to ask, so easy to get, so comfortable to have. But, as he says, he remembered how confidently he has spoken of God's defence, and he feels that he must be true to his professed creed, even if it deprives him of the king's guards. He halts his followers for three days

at the last station before the desert, and there, with fasting and prayer, they put themselves in God's hand; and then the band, with their wives and little ones, and their substance,—a heavily-loaded and feeble caravan,—fling themselves into the dangers of the long, dreary, robber-haunted march. Did not the scribe's robe cover as brave a heart as ever beat beneath a breastplate?

That symbolic phrase, 'the hand of our God,' as expressive of the divine protection, occurs with remarkable frequency in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, and though not peculiar to them, is yet strikingly characteristic of them. It has a certain beauty and force of its own. The hand is of course the seat of active power. It is on or over a man like some great shield held aloft above him, below which there is safe hiding. So that great Hand bends itself over us, and we are secure beneath its hollow. As a child sometimes carries a tender-winged butterfly in the globe of its two hands that the bloom on the wings may not be ruffled by fluttering, so He carries our feeble, unarmoured souls enclosed in the covert of His Almighty hand. 'Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of His hand?' 'Who hath gathered the wind in His fists?' In that curved palm where all the seas lie as a very little thing, we are held; the grasp that keeps back the tempests from their wild rush, keeps us, too, from being smitten by their blast. As a father may lay his own large muscular hand on his child's tiny fingers to help him, or as 'Elisha put his hands on the king's hands,' that the contact might strengthen him to shoot the 'arrow of the Lord's deliverance,' so the hand of our God is upon us to impart power as well as protection; and our 'bow abides in strength,' when 'the arms of our hands are

made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob.' That was Ezra's faith, and that should be ours.

Note Ezra's sensitive shrinking from anything like inconsistency between his creed and his practice. It was easy to talk about God's protection when he was safe behind the walls of Babylon; but now the pinch had come. There was a real danger before him and his unwarlike followers. No doubt, too, there were plenty of people who would have been delighted to catch him tripping; and he felt that his cheeks would have tingled with shame if they had been able to say, 'Ah! that is what all his fine professions come to, is it? He wants a convoy, does he? We thought as much. It is always so with these people who talk in that style. They are just like the rest of us when the pinch comes.' So, with a high and keen sense of what was required by his avowed principles, he will have no guards for the road. *There was a man whose religion was at any rate not a fair-weather religion. It did not go off in fine speeches about trusting to the protection of God, spoken from behind the skirts of the king, or from the middle of a phalanx of his soldiers. He clearly meant what he said, and believed every word of it as a prose fact, which was solid enough to build conduct on.*

I am afraid a great many of us would rather have tried to reconcile our asking for a band of horsemen with our professed trust in God's hand; and there would have been plenty of excuses very ready about using means as well as exercising faith, and not being called upon to abandon advantages, and not pushing a good principle to Quixotic lengths, and so on, and so on. But whatever truth there is in such considerations, at any rate we may well learn the lesson of

this story—to be true to our professed principles; to beware of making our religion a matter of words; to live, when the time for putting them into practice comes, by the maxims which we have been forward to proclaim when there was no risk in applying them; and to try sometimes to look at our lives with the eyes of people who do not share our faith, that we may bring our actions up to the mark of what they expect of us. If 'the Church' would oftener think of what 'the world' looks for from it, it would seldomer have cause to be ashamed of the terrible gap between it words and its deeds.

Especially in regard to this matter of trust in an unseen Hand, and reliance on visible helps, we all need to be very rigid in our self-inspection. Faith in the good hand of God upon us for good should often lead to the abandonment, and always to the subordination, of material aids. It is a question of detail, which each man must settle for himself as each occasion arises, whether in any given case abandonment or subordination is our duty. This is not the place to enter on so large and difficult a question. But, at all events, let us remember, and try to work into our own lives, that principle which the easy-going Christianity of this day has honeycombed with so many exceptions, that it scarcely has any whole surface left at all; that the absolute surrender and forsaking of external helps and goods is sometimes essential to the preservation and due expression of reliance on God.

There is very little fear of any of us pushing that principle to Quixotic lengths. The danger is all the other way. So it is worth while to notice that we have here an instance of a man's being carried by a certain lofty enthusiasm further than the mere law

of duty would take him. There would have been no harm in Ezra's asking an escort, seeing that his whole enterprise was made possible by the king's support. He would not have been 'leaning on an arm of flesh' by availing himself of the royal troops, any more than when he used the royal firman. But a true man often feels that he cannot do the things which he might without sin do. 'All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient,' said Paul. The same Apostle eagerly contended that he had a perfect right to money support from the Gentile Churches; and then, in the next breath, flamed up into, 'I have used none of these things, for it were better for me to die, than that any man should make my glorying void.' A sensitive spirit, or one profoundly stirred by religious emotion, will, like the apostle whose feet were moved by love, far outrun the slower soul, whose steps are only impelled by the thought of duty. Better that the cup should run over than that it should not be full. Where we delight to do His will, there will often be more than a scrupulously regulated enough; and where there is not sometimes that 'more,' there will never be enough.

'Give all thou canst; high Heaven rejects the lore
Of nicely calculated less or more.'

What shall we say of people who profess that God is their portion, and are as eager in the scramble for money as anybody? What kind of a commentary will sharp-sighted, sharp-tongued observers have a right to make on us, whose creed is so unlike theirs, while our lives are identical? Do you believe, friends! that 'the hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek Him'? Then, do you not think that racing after the

prizes of this world, with flushed cheeks and labouring breath, or longing, with a gnawing hunger of heart, for any earthly good, or lamenting over the removal of creatural defences and joys, as if heaven were empty because some one's place here is, or as if God were dead because dear ones die, may well be a shame to us, and a taunt on the lips of our enemies? Let us learn again the lesson from this old story,—that if our faith in God is not the veriest sham, it demands and will produce, the abandonment sometimes and the subordination always, of external helps and material good.

Notice, too, Ezra's preparation for receiving the divine help. There, by the river Ahava, he halts his company like a prudent leader, to repair omissions, and put the last touches to their organisation before facing the wilderness. But he has another purpose also. 'I proclaimed a fast there, to seek of God a right way for us.' There was no foolhardiness in his courage; he was well aware of all the possible dangers on the road; and whilst he is confident of the divine protection, he knows that, in his own quiet, matter-of-fact words, it is given 'to all them that *seek* Him.' So his faith not only impels him to the renunciation of the Babylonian guard, but to earnest supplication for the defence in which he is so confident. He is sure it will be given—so sure, that he will have no other shield; and yet he fasts and prays that he and his company may receive it. He prays because he is sure that he will receive it, and does receive it because he prays and is sure.

So for us, the condition and preparation on and by which we are sheltered by that great Hand, is the faith that asks, and the asking of faith. We must forsake

the earthly props, but we must also believingly desire to be upheld by the heavenly arms. We make God responsible for our safety when we abandon other defence, and commit ourselves to Him. With eyes open to our dangers, and full consciousness of our own unarmed and unwarlike weakness, let us solemnly commend ourselves to Him, rolling all our burden on His strong arms, knowing that He is able to keep that which we have committed to Him. He will accept the trust, and set His guards about us. As the song of the returning exiles, which may have been sung by the river Ahava, has it: 'My help cometh from the Lord. The Lord is thy keeper. The Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand.'

So our story ends with the triumphant vindication of this Quixotic faith. A flash of joyful feeling breaks through the simple narrative, as it tells how the words spoken before the king came true in the experience of the weaponless pilgrims: 'The hand of our God *was* upon us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way; and we came to Jerusalem.' It was no rash venture that we made. He was all that we hoped and asked. Through all the weary march He led us. From the wild, desert-born robbers, that watched us from afar, ready to come down on us, from ambushes and hidden perils, He kept us, because we had none other help, and all our hope was in Him. The ventures of faith are ever rewarded. We cannot set our expectations from God too high. What we dare scarcely hope now we shall one day remember. When we come to tell the completed story of our lives, we shall have to record the fulfilment of all God's promises, and the accomplishment of all our prayers that were built on these. Here let us cry, 'Re

Thy hand upon us.' Here let us trust, Thy hand will be upon us. Then we shall have to say, 'The hand of our God was upon us,' and as we look from the watch-towers of the city, on the desert that stretches to its very walls, and remember all the way by which He led us, we shall rejoice over His vindication of our poor faith, and praise Him that 'not one thing hath failed of all the things which the Lord our God spake concerning us.'

THE CHARGE OF THE PILGRIM PRIESTS

'Watch ye, and keep them, until ye weigh them . . . at Jerusalem, in the chambers of the house of the Lord.'—EZRA viii. 29.

THE little band of Jews, seventeen hundred in number, returning from Babylon, had just started on that long pilgrimage, and made a brief halt in order to get everything in order for their transit across the desert; when their leader Ezra, taking count of his men, discovers that amongst them there are none of the priests or Levites. He then takes measures to reinforce his little army with a contingent of these, and entrusts to their special care a very valuable treasure in gold, and silver, and sacred vessels, which had been given to them for use in the house of the Lord. The words which I have taken as text are a portion of the charge which he gave to those twelve priestly guardians of the precious things, that were to be used in worship when they got back to the Temple. 'Watch and keep them, until ye weigh them, in the chambers of the house of the Lord.'

So I think I may venture, without being unduly fanciful, to take these words as a type of the in-

junctions which are given to us Christian people; and to see in them a striking and picturesque representation of the duties that devolve upon us in the course of our journey across the desert to the Temple-Home above.

And to begin with, let me remind you, for a moment or two, what the precious treasure is which is thus entrusted to our keeping and care. We can scarcely, in such a connection and with such a metaphor, forget the words of our Lord about a certain king that went to receive his kingdom, and to return; who called together his servants, and gave to each of them according to their several ability, with the injunction to trade upon that until he came. The same metaphor which our Master employed lies in this story before us—in the one case, sacrificial vessels and sacred treasures; in the other case, the talents out of the rich possessions of the departing king.

Nor can we forget either the other phase of the same figure which the Apostle employs when he says to his 'own son' and substitute, Timothy: 'That good thing which was committed unto thee, keep by the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in us,' nor that other word to the same Timothy, which says: 'O Timothy! keep that which was committed to thy trust, and avoid profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science, falsely so called.' In these quotations, the treasure, and the rich deposit, is the faith once delivered to the saints; the solemn message of love and peace in Jesus Christ, which was entrusted, first of all to those preachers, but as truly to every one of Christ's disciples. ,

So, then, the metaphor is capable of two applications. The first is to the rich treasure and solemn trust of our own nature, of our own souls; the faculties and

capacities, precious beyond all count, rich beyond all else that a man has ever received. Nothing that you have is half so much as that which you are. The possession of a soul that knows and loves, and can obey; that trusts and desires; that can yearn and reach out to Jesus Christ, and to God in Christ; of a conscience that can yield to His command; and faculties of comprehending and understanding what comes to them from Jesus Christ—that is more than any other possession, treasure, or trust. That which you and I carry with us—the infinite possibilities of these awful spirits of ours—the tremendous faculties which are given to every human soul, and which, like a candle plunged into oxygen, are meant to burn far more brightly under the stimulus of Christian faith and the possession of God's truth, are the rich deposit committed to our charge. You priests of the living God, you men and women, you say that you are Christ's, and therefore are consecrated to a nobler priesthood than any other—to you is given this solemn charge: 'That good thing which is committed unto thee, keep by the Holy Ghost that dwelleth in you.' The precious treasure of your own natures, your own hearts, your own understandings, wills, consciences, desires—keep these, until they are weighed in the house of the Lord in Jerusalem.

And in like manner, taking the other aspect of the metaphor—we have given to us, in order that we may do something with it, that great deposit and treasure of truth, which is all embodied and incarnated in Jesus Christ our Lord. It is bestowed upon us that we may use it for ourselves, and in order that we may carry it triumphantly all through the world. Possession involves responsibility always. The word

of salvation is given to us. If we go tampering with it, by erroneous apprehension, by unfair usage, by failing to apply it to our own daily life; then it will fade and disappear from our grasp. It is given to us in order that we may keep it safe, and carry it high up, across the desert, as becomes the priests of the most high God.

The treasure is first—our own selves—with all that we are and may be, under the stimulating and quickening influence of His grace and Spirit. The treasure is next—His great word of salvation, once delivered unto the saints, and to be handed on, without diminution or alteration in its fair perspective and manifold harmonies, to the generations that are to come. So, think of yourselves as the priests of God, journeying through the wilderness, with the treasures of the Temple and the vessels of the sacrifice for your special deposit and charge.

Further, I touch on the command, the guardianship that is here set forth. ‘Watch ye, and keep them.’ That is to say, I suppose, according to the ordinary idiom of the Old Testament, ‘Watch, in order that you may keep.’ Or to translate it into other words: The treasure which is given into our hands requires, for its safe preservation, unceasing vigilance. Take the picture of my text: These Jews were four months, according to the narrative, in travelling from their first station upon their journey to Jerusalem across the desert. There were enemies lying in wait for them by the way. With noble self-restraint and grand chivalry, the leader of the little band says: ‘I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen, to help us against the enemy in the way; because we had spoken unto the king, saying,

The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek Him; but His power and His wrath is against all that forsake Him.' And so they would not go to him, cap in hand, and ask him to give them a guard to take care of them; but 'We fasted and besought our God for this; and He was intreated of us.'

Thus the little company, without arms, without protection, with nothing but a prayer and a trust to make them strong, flung themselves into the pathless desert with all those precious things in their possession; and all the precaution which Ezra took was to lay hold of the priests in the little party, and to say: 'Here! all through the march do you stick by these precious things. Whoever sleeps, do you watch. Whoever is careless, be you vigilant. Take these for your charge, and remember I weigh them here before we start, and they will be all weighed again when we get there. So be alert.'

And is not that exactly what Christ says to us? 'Watch; keep them; be vigilant, that ye may keep; and keep them, because they will be weighed and registered when you arrive there.'

I cannot do more than touch upon two or three of the ways in which this charge may be worked out, in its application for ourselves, beginning with that first one which is implied in the words of the text—*unslumbering vigilance*; then *trust*, like the trust which is glorified in the context, depending only on 'the good hand of our God upon us'; then *purity*, because, as Ezra said, 'Ye are holy unto the Lord. The vessels are holy also'; and therefore ye are the fit persons to guard them. And besides these, there is, in our keeping our trust, a method which does not apply to the incident before us; namely, *use*, in order to their preservation.

That is to say, first of all, no slumber; not a moment's relaxation; or some of those who lie in wait for us on the way will be down upon us, and some of the precious things will go. While all the rest of the wearied camp slept, the guardians of the treasure had to outwatch the stars. While others might straggle on the march, lingering here or there, or resting on some patch of green, they had to close up round their precious charge; others might let their eyes wander from the path, they had ever to look to their charge. For them the journey had a double burden, and unslumbering vigilance was their constant duty.

We likewise have unslumberingly and ceaselessly to watch over that which is committed to our charge. For, depend upon it, if for an instant we turn away our heads, the thievish birds that flutter over us will be down upon the precious seed that is in our basket, or that we have sown in the furrows, and it will be gone. Watch, that ye may keep.

And then, still further, see how in this story before us there are brought out very picturesquely, and very simply, deeper lessons still. It is not enough that a man shall be for ever keeping his eye upon his own character and his own faculties, and seeking sedulously to cultivate and improve them, as he that must give an account. There must be another look than that. Ezra said, in effect, 'Not all the cohorts of Babylon can help us; and we do not want them. We have one strong hand that will keep us safe'; and so he, and his men, with all this mass of wealth, so tempting to the wild robbers that haunted the road, flung themselves into the desert, knowing that all along it there were, as he says, 'such as lay in wait for them.' His confidence was: 'God will bring us all safe out

to the end there; and we shall carry every glittering piece of the precious things that we brought out of Babylon right into the Temple of Jerusalem.' Yet he says, 'Watch ye and keep them.'

What does that come to in reference to our religious experience? Why this: 'Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God that worketh in you, both to will and to do of His own good pleasure.' You do not need these external helps. Fling yourself wholly upon His keeping hand, and also watch and keep yourselves. 'I know in whom I have believed, and that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day,' is the complement of the other words, 'That good thing which was committed unto thee, keep by the Holy Ghost.'

So guardianship is, first, unceasing vigilance; and then it is lowly trust. And besides that, it is *punctilious purity*. 'I said unto them, Ye are holy unto the Lord; the vessels are holy unto the Lord. Watch ye, and keep them.'

It was fitting that priests should carry the things that belonged to the Temple. No other hands but consecrated hands had a right to touch them. To none other guardianship but the guardianship of the possessors of a symbolic and ceremonial purity, could the vessels of a symbolic and ceremonial worship be entrusted; and to none others but the possessors of real and spiritual holiness can the treasures of the true Temple, of an inward and spiritual worship, be entrusted. 'Beye clean that bear the vessels of the Lord,' said Isaiah using a kindred metaphor. The only way to keep our treasure undiminished and untarnished, is to keep ourselves pure and clean.

And, lastly, we have to exercise a guardianship which

not only means unslumbering vigilance, lowly trust, punctilious purity, but also requires the constant use of the treasure.

‘Watch ye, and keep them.’ Although the vessels which those priests bore through the desert were used for no service during all the weary march, they weighed just the same when they got to the end as at the beginning; though, no doubt, even their fine gold had become dim and tarnished through disuse. But if we do not use the vessels that are entrusted to our care, *they will not weigh the same*. The man that wrapped up his talent in the napkin, and said, ‘Lo, there thou hast that is thine,’ was too sanguine. There was never an unused talent rolled up in a handkerchief yet, but when it was taken out and put into the scales it was lighter than when it was committed to the keeping of the earth. Gifts that are used fructify. Capacities that are strained to the uttermost increase. Service strengthens the power for service; and just as the reward for work is more work, the way for making ourselves fit for bigger things is to do the things that are lying by us. The blacksmith’s arm, the sailor’s eye, the organs of any piece of handicraft, as we all know, are strengthened by exercise; and so it is in this higher region.

And so, dear brethren, take these four words—vigilance, trust, purity, exercise. ‘Watch ye, and keep them, until they are weighed in the chambers of the House of the Lord.’

And, lastly, think of that weighing in the House of the Lord. Cannot you see the picture of the little band when they finally reach the goal of their pilgrimage; and three days after they arrived, as the narrative tells us, went up into the Temple, and there, by

number and by weight, rendered up their charge, and were clear of their responsibility? 'And the first came and said, Lord, thy pound hath gained ten pounds. And he said, Well, thou good servant, because thou hast been faithful in a very little, have thou authority over ten cities.'

Oh! how that thought of the day when they would empty out the rich treasure upon the marble pavement, and clash the golden vessels into the scales, must have filled their hearts with vigilance during all the weary watches, when desert stars looked down upon the slumbering encampment, and they paced wakeful all the night. And how the thought, too, must have filled their hearts with joy, when they tried to picture to themselves the sigh of satisfaction, and the sense of relief with which, after all the perils, their 'feet would stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem,' and they would be able to say, 'That which thou hast given us, we have kept, and nothing of it is lost.'

A lifetime would be a small expenditure to secure that; and though it cannot be that you and I will meet the trial and the weighing of that great day without many failures and much loss, yet we may say: 'I know in whom I have believed, and that He is able to keep my deposit—whether it be in the sense of that which I have committed unto Him, or in the sense of that which He has committed unto me—against that day.' We may hope that, by His gracious help and His pitying acceptance, even such careless stewards and negligent watchers as we are, may lay ourselves down in peace at the last, saying, 'I have kept the faith,' and may be awakened by the word, 'Well done! good and faithful servant.'

THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

A REFORMER'S SCHOOLING

'The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah. And it came to pass in the month Chisleu, in the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the palace, 2. That Hanani, one of my brethren, came, he and certain men of Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem. 3. And they said unto me, The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire. 4. And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven, 5. And said, I beseech Thee, O Lord God of heaven, the great and terrible God, that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love Him and observe His commandments: 6. Let Thine ear now be attentive, and Thine eyes open, that Thou mayest hear the prayer of Thy servant, which I pray before Thee now, day and night, for the children of Israel Thy servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against Thee: both I and my father's house have sinned. 7. We have dealt very corruptly against Thee, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the judgments, which Thou commandedst Thy servant Moses. 8. Remember, I beseech Thee, the word that Thou commandedst Thy servant Moses, saying, If ye transgress, I will scatter you abroad among the nations: 9. But if ye turn unto Me, and keep My commandments, and do them; though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of the heaven, yet will I gather them from thence, and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set My name there. 10. Now these are Thy servants and Thy people, whom Thou hast redeemed by Thy great power, and by Thy strong hand. 11. O Lord, I beseech Thee, let now Thine ear be attentive to the prayer of Thy servant, and to the prayer of Thy servants, who desire to fear Thy name: and prosper, I pray Thee, Thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. For I was the king's cupbearer.'—NEH. I. 1-11.

THE date of the completion of the Temple is 516 B.C.; that of Nehemiah's arrival 445 B.C. The colony of returned exiles seems to have made little progress during that long period. Its members settled down, and much of their enthusiasm cooled, as we see from the reforms which Ezra had to inaugurate fourteen years before Nehemiah. The majority of men, even if touched by spiritual fervour, find it hard

to keep on the high levels for long. Breathing is easier lower down. As is often the case, a brighter flame of zeal burned in the bosoms of sympathisers at a distance than in those of the actual workers, whose contact with hard realities and petty details disenchanting them. Thus the impulse to nobler action came, not from one of the colony, but from a Jew in the court of the Persian king.

This passage tells us how God prepared a man for a great work, and how the man prepared himself.

I. Sad tidings and their effect on a devout servant of God (vs. 1-4). The time and place are precisely given. 'The month Chisleu' corresponds to the end of November and beginning of December. 'The twentieth year' is that of Artaxerxes (Neh. ii. 1). 'Shushan,' or Susa, was the royal winter residence, and 'the palace' was 'a distinct quarter of the city, occupying an artificial eminence.' Note the absence of the name of the king. Nehemiah is so familiar with his greatness that he takes for granted that every reader can fill the gaps. But, though the omission shows how large a space the court occupied in his thoughts, a true Jewish heart beat below the courtier's robe. That flexibility which enabled them to stand as trusted servants of the kings of many lands, and yet that inflexible adherence to, and undying love of, Israel, has always been a national characteristic. We can think of this youthful cup-bearer as yearning for one glimpse of the 'mountains round about Jerusalem' while he filled his post in Shushan.

His longings were kindled into resolve by intercourse with a little party of Jews from Judæa, among whom was his own brother. They had been to see how

things went there, and the fact that one of them was a member of Nehemiah's family seems to imply that the same sentiments belonged to the whole household. Eager questions brought out sorrowful answers. The condition of the 'remnant' was one of 'great affliction and reproach,' and the ground of the reproach was probably (Neh. ii. 17; iv. 2-4) the still ruined fortifications.

It has been supposed that the breaking down of the walls and burning of the gates, mentioned in verse 3, were recent, and subsequent to the events recorded in Ezra; but it is more probable that the project for rebuilding the defences, which had been stopped by superior orders (Ezra iv. 12-16), had not been resumed, and that the melancholy ruins were those which had met the eyes of Zerubbabel nearly a hundred years before. Communication between Shushan and Jerusalem cannot have been so infrequent that the facts now borne in on Nehemiah might not have been known before. But the impression made by facts depends largely on their narrator, and not a little on the mood of the hearer. It was one thing to hear general statements, and another to sit with one's brother, and see through his eyes the dismal failure of the 'remnant' to carry out the purpose of their return. So the story, whether fresh or repeated with fresh force, made a deep dint in the young cupbearer's heart, and changed his life's outlook. God prepares His servants for their work by laying on their souls a sorrowful realisation of the miseries which other men regard, and they themselves have often regarded, very lightly. The men who have been raised up to do great work for God and men, have always to begin by greatly and sadly feeling the weight of the sins and sorrows which they are destined to

remove. No man will do worthy work at rebuilding the walls who has not wept over the ruins.

So Nehemiah prepared himself for his work by brooding over the tidings with tears, by fasting and by prayer. There is no other way of preparation. Without the sad sense of men's sorrows, there will be no earnestness in alleviating them, nor self-sacrificing devotion; and without much prayer there will be little consciousness of weakness or dependence on divine help.

Note the grand and apparently immediate resolution to throw up brilliant prospects and face a life of danger and suffering and toil. Nehemiah was evidently a favourite with the king, and had the ball at his foot. But the ruins on Zion were more attractive to him than the splendours of Shushan, and he willingly flung away his chances of a great career to take his share of 'affliction and reproach.' He has never had justice done him in popular estimation. He is not one of the well-known biblical examples of heroic self-abandonment; but he did just what Moses did, and the eulogium of the Epistle to the Hebrews fits him as well as the lawgiver; for he too chose 'rather to suffer with the people of God than to enjoy pleasures for a season.' So must we all, in our several ways, do, if we would have a share in building the walls of the city of God.

II. The prayer (vs. 5-11). The course of thought in this prayer is very instructive. It begins with solemnly laying before God His own great name, as the mightiest plea with Him, and the strongest encouragement to the suppliant. That commencement is no mere proper invocation, conventionally regarded as the right way of beginning, but it expresses the petitioner's effort to lay hold on God's character as the ground of his hope

of answer. The terms employed remarkably blend what Nehemiah had learned from Persian religion and what from a better source. He calls upon Jehovah, the great name which was the special possession of Israel. He also uses the characteristic Persian designation of 'the God of heaven,' and identifies the bearer of that name, not with the god to whom it was originally applied, but with Israel's Jehovah. He takes the crown from the head of the false deity, and lays it at the feet of the God of his fathers. Whatsoever names for the Supreme Excellence any tongues have coined, they all belong to our God, in so far as they are true and noble. The modern 'science of comparative religion' yields many treasures which should be laid up in Jehovah's Temple.

But the rest of the designations are taken from the Old Testament, as was fitting. The prayer throughout is full of allusions and quotations, and shows how this cupbearer of Artaxerxes had fed his young soul on God's word, and drawn thence the true nourishment of high and holy thoughts and strenuous resolutions and self-sacrificing deeds. Prayers which are cast in the mould of God's own revelation of Himself will not fail of answer. True prayer catches up the promises that flutter down to us, and flings them up again like arrows.

The prayer here is all built, then, on that name of Jehovah, and on what the name involves, chiefly on the thought of God as keeping covenant and mercy. He has bound Himself in solemn, irrefragable compact, to a certain line of action. Men 'know where to have Him,' if we may venture on the familiar expression. He has given us a chart of His course, and He will adhere to it. Therefore we can go to Him with our

prayers, so long as we keep these within the ample space of His covenant, and ourselves within its terms, by loving obedience.

The petition that God's ears might be sharpened and His eyes open to the prayer is cast in a familiar mould. It boldly transfers to Him not only the semblance of man's form, but also the likeness of His processes of action. Hearing the cry for help precedes active intervention in the case of men's help, and the strong imagery of the prayer conceives of similar sequence in God. But the figure is transparent, and the 'anthropomorphism' so plain that no mistakes can arise in its interpretation.

Note, too, the light touch with which the suppliant's relation to God ('Thy servant') and his long-continued cry ('day and night') are but just brought in for a moment as pleas for a gracious hearing. The prayer is 'for Thy servants the children of Israel,' in which designation, as the next clauses show, the relation established by God, and not the conduct of men, is pleaded as a reason for an answer.

The mention of that relation brings at once to Nehemiah's mind the terrible unfaithfulness to it which had marked, and still continued to mark, the whole nation. So lowly confession follows (vs. 6, 7). Unprofitable servants they had indeed been. The more loftily we think of our privileges, the more clearly should we discern our sins. Nothing leads a true heart to such self-ashamed penitence as reflection on God's mercy. If a man thinks that God has taken him for a servant, the thought should bow him with conscious unworthiness, not lift him in self-satisfaction. Nehemiah's confession not only sprung from the thought of Israel's vocation, so poorly fulfilled, but it also laid

the groundwork for his further petitions. It is useless to ask God to help us to repair the wastes if we do not cast out the sins which have made them. The beginning of all true healing of sorrow is confession of sins. Many promising schemes for the alleviation of national and other distresses have come to nothing because, unlike Nehemiah's, they did not begin with prayer, or prayed for help without acknowledging sin.

And the man who is to do work for God and to get God to bless his work must not be content with acknowledging other people's sins, but must always say, 'We have sinned,' and not seldom say, 'I have sinned.' That penitent consciousness of evil is indispensable to all who would make their fellows happier. God works with bruised reeds. The sense of individual transgression gives wonderful tenderness, patience amid gainsaying, submission in failure, dependence on God in difficulty, and lowliness in success. Without it we shall do little for ourselves or for anybody else.

The prayer next reminds God of His own words (vs. 8, 9), freely quoted and combined from several passages (Lev. xxvi. 33-45; Deut. iv. 25-31, etc.). The application of these passages to the then condition of things is at first sight somewhat loose, since part of the people were already restored; and the purport of the prayer is not the restoration of the remainder, but the deliverance of those already in the land from their distresses. Still, the promise gives encouragement to the prayer and is powerful with God, inasmuch as it could not be said to have been fulfilled by so incomplete a restoration as that at present realised. What God does must be perfectly done; and His great word

is not exhausted so long as any fuller accomplishment of it can be imagined.

The reminder of the promise is clinched (v. 10) by the same appeal as formerly to the relation to Himself into which God had been pleased to bring the nation, with an added reference to former deeds, such as the Exodus, in which His strong hand had delivered them. We are always sure of an answer if we ask God not to contradict Himself. Since He has begun He will make an end. It will never be said of Him that He 'began to build and was not able to finish.' His past is a mirror in which we can read His future. The return from Babylon is implied in the Exodus.

A reiteration of earlier words follows, with the addition that Nehemiah now binds, as it were, his single prayer in a bundle with those of the like-minded in Israel. He gathers single ears into a sheaf, which he brings as a 'wave-offering.' And then, in one humble little sentence at the end, he puts his only personal request. The modesty of the man is lovely. His prayer has been all for the people. Remarkably enough, there is no definite petition in it. He never once says right out what he so earnestly desires, and the absence of specific requests might be laid hold of by sceptical critics as an argument against the genuineness of the prayer. But it is rather a subtle trait, on which no forger would have been likely to hit. Sometimes silence is the very result of entire occupation of mind with a thought. He says nothing about the particular nature of his request, just because he is so full of it. But he does ask for favour in the eyes of 'this man,' and that he may be prospered 'this day.'

So this was his morning prayer on that eventful day, which was to settle his life's work. The 'certain days

of solitary meditation on his nation's griefs had led to a resolution. He says nothing about his long brooding, his slow decision, his conflicts with lower projects of personal ambition. He 'burns his own smoke,' as we all should learn to do. But he asks that the capricious and potent will of the king may be inclined to grant his request. If our morning supplication is 'Prosper Thy servant this day,' and our purposes are for God's glory, we need not fear facing anybody. However powerful Artaxerxes was, he was but 'this man,' not God. The phrase does not indicate contempt or undervaluing of the solid reality of his absolute power over Nehemiah, but simply expresses the conviction that the king, too, was a subject of God's, and that his heart was in the hand of Jehovah, to mould as He would. The consciousness of dependence on God and the habit of communion with Him give a man a clear sight of the limitations of earthly dignities, and a modest boldness which is equally remote from rudeness and servility.

Thus prepared for whatever might be the issue of that eventful day, the young cupbearer rose from his knees, drew a long breath, and went to his work. Well for us if we go to ours, whether it be a day of crisis or of commonplace, in like fashion! Then we shall have like defence and like calmness of heart.

THE CHURCH AND SOCIAL EVILS

'It came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven.'—NEH. I. 4.

NINETY years had passed since the returning exiles had arrived at Jerusalem. They had encountered many

difficulties which had marred their progress and cooled their enthusiasm. The Temple, indeed, was rebuilt, but Jerusalem lay in ruins, and its walls remained as they had been left, by Nebuchadnezzar's siege, some century and a half before. A little party of pious pilgrims had gone from Persia to the city, and had come back to Shushan with a sad story of weakness and despondency, affliction and hostility. One of the travellers had a brother, a youth named Nehemiah, who was a cup-bearer in the court of the Persian king. Living in a palace, and surrounded with luxury, his heart was with his brethren; and the ruins of Jerusalem were dearer to him than the pomp of Shushan.

My text tells how the young cupbearer was affected by the tidings, and how he wept and prayed before God. The accurate dates given in this book show that this period of brooding contemplation of the miseries of his brethren lasted for four months. Then he took a great resolution, flung up brilliant prospects, identified himself with the afflicted colony, and asked for leave to go and share, and, if it might be, to redress, the sorrows which had made so deep a dint upon his heart.

Now, I think that this vivid description, drawn by himself, of the emotions excited in Nehemiah by his countrymen's sorrows, which influenced his whole future, contains some very plain lessons for Christian people, the observance of which is every day becoming more imperative by reason of the drift of public opinion, and the new prominence which is being given to so-called 'social questions.' I wish to gather up one or two of these lessons for you now.

I. First, then, note the plain Christian duty of sympathetic contemplation of surrounding sorrows.

Nehemiah might have made a great many very good excuses for treating lightly the tidings that his brother had brought him. He might have said: 'Jerusalem is a long way off. I have my own work to do; it is no part of my business to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. I am the King's cupbearer. They went with their eyes open, and experience has shown that the people who knew when they were well off, and stayed where they were, were a great deal wiser.' These were not his excuses. He let the tidings fill his heart, and burn there.

Now, the first condition of sympathy is knowledge; and the second is attending to what we do know. Nehemiah had probably known, in a kind of vague way, for many a day how things were going in Palestine. Communications between it and Persia were not so difficult but that there would come plenty of Government despatches; and a man at headquarters who had the ear of the monarch, was not likely to be ignorant of what was going on in that part of his dominions. But there is all the difference between hearing vague general reports, and sitting and hearing your own brother tell you what he had seen with his own eyes. So the impression which had existed before was all inoperative until it was kindled by attention to the facts which all the time had been, in some degree, known.

Now, how many of us are there that know—and don't know—what is going on round about us in the slums and back courts of this city? How many of us are there who are habitually ignorant of what we actually know, because we never, as we say, 'give heed' to it. 'I did not think of that,' is a very poor excuse about matters concerning which there is knowledge, whether

there is thought or not. And so I want to press upon all you Christian people the plain duty of knowing what you do know, and of giving an ample place in your thoughts to the stark staring facts around us.

Why! loads of people at present seem to think that the miseries, and hideous vices, and sodden immorality, and utter heathenism, which are found down amongst the foundations of every civic community are as indispensable to progress as the noise of the wheels of a train is to its advancement, or as the bilge-water in a wooden ship is to keep its seams tight. So we prate about 'civilisation,' which means turning men into cities. If agglomerating people into these great communities, which makes so awful a feature of modern life, be necessarily attended by such abominations as we live amongst and never think about, then, better that there had never been civilisation in such a sense at all. Every consideration of communion with and conformity to Jesus Christ, of loyalty to His words, of a true sense of brotherhood and of lower things—such as self-interest—every consideration demands that Christian people shall take to their hearts, in a fashion that the churches have never done yet, 'the condition of England question,' and shall ask, 'Lord! what wouldst Thou have me to do?'

I do not care to enter upon controversy raised by recent utterances, the motive of which may be worthy of admiration, though the expression cannot be acquitted of the charge of exaggeration, to the effect that the Christian churches as a whole have been careless of the condition of the people. It is not true in its absolute sense. I suppose that, taking the country over, the majority of the members of, at all events the Nonconformist churches and congregations, are in

receipt of weekly wages or belong to the upper ranks of the working-classes, and that the lever which has lifted them to these upper ranks has been God's Gospel. I suppose it will be admitted that the past indifference with which we are charged belonged to the whole community, and that the new sense of responsibility which has marked, and blessedly marked, recent years, is largely owing to political and other causes which have lately come into operation. I suppose it will not be denied that, to a very large extent, any efforts which have been made in the past for the social, intellectual, and moral, and religious elevation of the people have had their impulse, and to a large extent their support, both pecuniary and active, from Christian churches and individuals. All that is perfectly true and, I believe, undeniable. But it is also true that there remains an enormous, shameful, dead mass of inertness in our churches, and that, unless we can break up that, the omens are bad, bad for society, worse for the church. If cholera is raging in the slums, the suburbs will not escape. If the hovels are infected, the mansions will have to pay their tribute to the disease. If we do not recognise the brotherhood of the suffering and the sinful, in any other fashion—'Then,' as a great teacher told us a generation ago now, and nobody paid any attention to him, 'then they will begin and show you that they are your brethren by killing some of you.' And so self-preservation conjoins with loftier motives to make this sympathetic observation of the surrounding sorrows the plainest of Christian duties.

II. Secondly, such a realisation of the dark facts is indispensable to all true work for alleviating them.

There is no way of helping men but by bearing what

they bear. No man will ever lighten a sorrow of which he has not himself felt the pressure. Jesus Christ's Cross, to which we are ever appealing as the ground of our redemption and the anchor of our hope, is these, thank God! But it is more than these. It is the pattern for our lives, and it lays down, with stringent accuracy and completeness, the enduring conditions of helping the sinful and the sorrowful. The 'saviours of society' have still, in lower fashion, to be crucified. Jesus Christ would never have been 'the Lamb of God that bore away the sins of the world' unless He Himself had 'taken our infirmities and borne our sicknesses.' No work of any real use will be done except by those whose hearts have bled with the feeling of the miseries which they set themselves to cure.

Oh! we all want a far fuller realisation of that sympathetic spirit of the pitying Christ, if we are ever to be of any use in the world, or to help the miseries of any of our brethren. Such a sorrowful and participating contemplation of men's sorrows springing from men's sins will give tenderness to our words, will give patience, will soften our whole bearing. Help that is flung to people, as you might fling a bone to a dog, hurts those whom it tries to help, and patronising help is help that does little good, and lecturing help does little more. You must take blind beggars by the hand if you are going to make them see; and you must not be afraid to lay your white, clean fingers upon the feculent masses of corruption in the leper's glistening whiteness if you are going to make him whole. Go down in order to lift, and remember that without sympathy there is no sufficient help, and without communion with Christ there is no sufficient sympathy.

III. Thirdly, such realisation of surrounding sorrows should drive to communion with God.

Nehemiah wept and mourned, and that was well. But between his weeping and mourning and his practical work there had to be still another link of connection. 'He wept and mourned,' and because he was sad he turned to God, 'and I fasted and prayed certain days.' There he got at once comfort for his sorrows, his sympathies, and deepening of his sympathies, and thence he drew inspiration that made him a hero and a martyr. So all true service for the world must begin with close communion with God.

There was a book published several years since which made a great noise in its little day, and called itself *The Service of Man*, which service it proposed to substitute for the effete conception of worship as the service of God. The service of man is, then, best done when it is the service of God. I suppose nowadays it is 'old-fashioned' and 'narrow,' which is the sin of sins at present, but I for my part have very little faith in the persistence and wide operation of any philanthropic motives except the highest—namely, compassion caught from Jesus Christ. I do not believe that you will get men, year in and year out, to devote themselves in any considerable numbers to the service of man unless you appeal to this highest of motives. You may enlist a little corps—and God forbid that I should deny such a plain fact—of selecter spirits to do purely secular alleviative work, with an entire ignoring of Christian motives, but you will never get the army of workers that is needed to grapple with the facts of our present condition, unless you touch the very deepest springs of conduct, and these are to be found in communion with God. All the rest is surface drainage. Get down to

the love of God, and the love of men therefrom, and you have got an Artesian well which will bubble up unfailingly.

And I have not much faith in remedies which ignore religion, and are brought, without communion with God, as sufficient for the disease. I do not want to say one word that might seem to depreciate what are good and valid and noble efforts in their several spheres. There is no need for antagonism—rather, Christian men are bound by every consideration to help to the utmost of their power, even in the incomplete attempts that are made to grapple with social problems. There is room enough for us all. But sure I am that until grapes and waterbeds cure smallpox, and a spoonful of cold water puts out Vesuvius, you will not cure the evils of the body politic by any lesser means than the application of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We hear a great deal to-day about a 'social gospel,' and I am glad of the conception, and of the favour which it receives. Only let us remember that the Gospel is social *second*, and individual *first*. And that if you get the love of God and obedience to Jesus Christ into a man's heart it will be like putting gas into a balloon, it will go up, and the man will get out of the slums fast enough; and he will not be a slave to the vices of the world much longer, and you will have done more for him and for the wide circle that he may influence than by any other means. I do not want to depreciate any helpers, but I say it is the work of the Christian church to carry to the world the only thing that will make men deeply and abidingly happy, because it will make them good.

IV. And so, lastly, such sympathy should be the parent of a noble, self-sacrificing life. Look at the

man in our text. He had the ball at his feet. He had the *entrée* of a court, and the ear of a king. Brilliant prospects were opening before him, but his brethren's sufferings drew him, and with a noble resolution of self-sacrifice, he shut himself out from the former and went into the wilderness. He is one of the Scripture characters that never have had due honour—a hero, a saint, a martyr, a reformer. He did, though in a smaller sphere, the very same thing that the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews magnified with his splendid eloquence, in reference to the great Lawgiver, 'And chose rather to suffer affliction with the people of God,' and to turn his back upon the dazzlements of a court, than to 'enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season,' whilst his brethren were suffering.

Now, dear friends! the letter of the example may be put aside; the spirit of it must be observed. If Christians are to do the work that they can do, and that Christ has put them into this world that they may do, there must be self-sacrifice with it. There is no shirking that obligation, and there is no discharging our duty without it. You and I, in our several ways, are as much under the sway of that absolute law, that 'if a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it brings forth fruit,' as ever was Jesus Christ or His Apostles. I have nothing to say about the manner of the sacrifice. It is no part of my business to prescribe to you details of duty. It is my business to insist on the principles which must regulate these, and of these principles in application to Christian service there is none more stringent than—'I will not offer unto my God burnt-offering of that which doth cost me nothing.'

I am sure that, under God, the great remedy for

social evils lies mainly here, that the bulk of professing Christians shall recognise and discharge their responsibilities. It is not ministers, city missionaries, Bible-women, or any other paid people that can do the work. It is by Christian men and by Christian women, and, if I might use a very vulgar distinction which has a meaning in the present connection, very specially by Christian ladies, taking their part in the work amongst the degraded and the outcasts, that our sorest difficulties and problems will be solved. If a church does not face these, well, all I can say is, its light will go out; and the sooner the better. 'If thou forbear to deliver them that are appointed to death, and say, Behold! I knew it not, shall not He that weigheth the hearts consider it, and shall He not render to every man according to his work?' And, on the other hand, there are no blessings more rich, select, sweet, and abiding, than are to be found in sharing the sorrow of the Man of Sorrows, and carrying the message of His pity and His redemption to an outcast world. 'If thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul, the Lord shall satisfy thy soul; and thou shalt be as a watered garden, and as a spring of water whose waters fail not.'

'OVER AGAINST HIS HOUSE'

'The priests repaired every one over against his house.'—NEH. iii. 28.

THE condition of our great cities has lately been forced upon public attention, and all kinds of men have been offering their panaceas. I am not about to enter upon that discussion, but I am glad to seize the

opportunity of saying one or two things which I think very much need to be said to individual Christian people about their duty in the matter. 'Every man over against his house' is the principle I desire to commend to you as going a long way to solve the problem of how to sweeten the foul life of our modern cities.

The story from which my text is taken does not need to detain us long. Nehemiah and his little band of exiles have come back to a ruined Jerusalem. Their first care is to provide for their safety, and the first step is to know the exact extent of their defencelessness. So we have the account of Nehemiah's midnight ride amongst the ruins of the broken walls. And then we read of the co-operation of all classes in the work of reconstruction. 'Many hands made light work.' Men and women, priests and nobles, goldsmiths, apothecaries, merchants, all seized trowel or spade, and wheeled and piled. One man puts up a long length of wall, another can only manage a little bit; another undertakes the locks, bolts, and bars for the gates. Roughly and hastily the work is done. The result, of course, is very unlike the stately structures of Solomon's or of Herod's time, but it is enough for shelter. We can imagine the sigh of relief with which the workers looked upon the completed circle of their rude fortifications.

The principle of division of labour in our text is repeated several times in this list of the builders. It was a natural one; a man would work all the better when he saw his own roof mutely appealing to be defended, and thought of the dear ones that were there. But I take these words mainly as suggesting

some thoughts applicable to the duties of Christian people in view of the spiritual wants of our great cities.

I. I need not do more than say a word or two about the ruins which need repair. If I dwell rather upon the dark side than on the bright side of city life I shall not be understood, as forgetting that the very causes which intensify the evil of a great city quicken the good—the friction of multitudes and the impetus thereby given to all kinds of mental activity. Here amongst us there is much that is admirable and noble—much public spirit, much wise and benevolent expenditure of thought and toil for the general good, much conjoint action by men of different parties, earnest antagonism and earnest co-operation, and a free, bracing intellectual atmosphere, which stimulates activity. All that is true, though, on the other hand, it is not good to live always within hearing of the clatter of machinery and the strife of tongues; and the wisdom that is born of solitary meditation and quiet thought is less frequently met with in cities than is the cleverness that is born of intercourse with men, and newspaper reading.

But there is a tragic other side to all that, which mostly we make up our minds to say little about and to forget. The indifference which has made that ignorance possible, and has in its turn been fed by the ignorance, is in some respects a more shocking phenomenon than the vicious life which it has allowed to rot and to reek unheeded.

Most of us have got so familiarised with the evils that stare us in the face every time we go out upon the pavements, that we have come to think of them

as being inseparable from our modern life, like the noise of a carriage wheel from its rotation. And is it so then? Is it indeed inevitable that within a stone's throw of our churches and chapels there should be thousands of men and women that have never been inside a place of worship since they were christened; and have no more religion than a horse? Must it be that the shining structure of our modern society, like an old Mexican temple, must be built upon a layer of living men, flung in for a foundation? Can it not be helped that there should be streets in our cities into which it is unfit for a decent woman to go by day alone, and unsafe for a brave man to venture after nightfall? Must men and women huddle together in dens where decency is as impossible as it is for swine in a sty? Is it an indispensable part of our material progress and wonderful civilisation that vice and crime and utter irreligion and hopeless squalor should go with it? Can all that bilge water really not be pumped out of the ship? If it be so, then I venture to say that, to a very large extent, progress is a delusion, and that the simple life of agricultural communities is better than this unwholesome aggregation of men.

The beginning of Nehemiah's work of repair was that sad midnight ride round the ruined walls. So there is a solemn obligation laid on Christian people to acquaint themselves with the awful facts, and then to meditate on them, till sacred, Christ-like compassion, pressing against the flood-gates of the heart, flings them open, and lets out a stream of helpful pity and saving deeds.

II. So much for my first point. My second is—the ruin is to be repaired mainly by the old Gospel of Jesus

Christ. Far be it from me to pit remedies against each other. The causes are complicated, and the cure must be as manifold as the causes. For my own part I believe that, in regard to the condition of the lowest of our outcast population, drink and lust have done it almost all, and that for all but an infinitesimal portion of it, intemperance is directly or indirectly the cause. That has to be fought by the distinct preaching of abstinence, and by the invoking of legislative restrictions upon the traffic. Wretched homes have to be dealt with by sanitary reform, which may require municipal and parliamentary action. Domestic discomfort has to be dealt with by teaching wives the principles of domestic economy. The gracious influence of art and music, pictures and window-gardening, and the like, will lend their aid to soften and refine. Coffee taverns, baths and wash-houses, workmen's clubs, and many other agencies are doing real and good work. I for one say, 'God speed to them all,' and willingly help them so far as I can.

But, as a Christian man, I believe that I know a thing that if lodged in a man's heart will do pretty nearly all which they aspire to do; and whilst I rejoice in the multiplied agencies for social elevation, I believe that I shall best serve my generation, and I believe that ninety-nine out of a hundred of you will do so too, by trying to get men to love and fear Jesus Christ the Saviour. If you can get His love into a man's heart, that will produce new tastes and new inclinations, which will reform, and sweeten, and purify faster than anything else does.

They tell us that Nonconformist ministers are never seen in the slums; well, that is a libel! But I should like to ask why it is that the Roman Catholic priest

is seen there more than the Nonconformist minister? Because the one man's congregation is there, and the other man's is not—which, being translated into other words, is this: the religion of Jesus Christ mostly keeps people out of the slums, and certainly it will take a man out of them if once it gets into his heart, more certainly and quickly than anything else will.

So, dear friends! if we have in our hearts and in our hands this great message of God's love, we have in our possession the germ out of which all things that are lovely and of good report will grow. It will purify, elevate, and sweeten society, because it will make individuals pure and strong, and homes holy and happy. We do not need to draw comparisons between this and other means of reparation, and still less to feel any antagonism to them or the benevolent men who work them; but we should fix it in our minds that the principles of Christ's Gospel adhered to by individuals, and therefore by communities, would have rendered such a condition of things impossible, and that the true repair of the ruin wrought by evil and ignorance, in the single soul, in the family, the city, the nation, the world, is to be found in building anew on the One Foundation which God has laid, even Jesus Christ, the Living Stone, whose pure life passes into all that are grounded and founded on Him.

III. Lastly, this remedy is to be applied by the individual action of Christian men and women on the people nearest them.

'The priests repaired every one over against his house.' We are always tempted, in the face of large disasters, to look for heroic and large remedies, and to

invoke corporate action of some sort, which is a great deal easier for most of us than the personal effort that is required. When a great scandal and danger like this of the condition of the lower layers of our civic population is presented before men, for one man that says, 'What can *I* do?' there are twenty who say, 'Somebody should do something. Government should do something. The Corporation should do something. This, that, or the other aggregate of men should do something.' And the individual calmly and comfortably slips his neck out of the collar and leaves it on the shoulders of these abstractions.

As I have said, there are plenty of things that need to be done by these somebodies. But what they do (they will be a long time in doing it), when they do get to work will only touch the fringe of the question, and the substance and the centre of it *you* can set to work upon this very day if you like, and not wait for anybody either to set you the example or to show you the way.

If you want to do people good you can; but you must pay the price for it. That price is personal sacrifice and effort. The example of Jesus Christ is the all-instructive one in the case. People talk about Him being their Pattern, but they often forget that whatever more there was in Christ's Cross and Passion there was this in it:—the exemplification for all time of the one law by which any reformation can be wrought on men—that a sympathising man shall give himself to do it, and that by personal influence alone men will be drawn and won from out of the darkness and filth. A loving heart and a sympathetic word, the exhibition of a Christian life and conduct, the fact of going down into the midst of evil and trying to lift

men out of it, are the old-fashioned and only magnets by which men are drawn to purer and higher life. That is God's way of saving the world—by the action of single souls on single souls. Masses of men can neither save nor be saved. Not in groups, but one by one, particle by particle, soul by soul, Christ draws men to Himself, and He does His work in the world through single souls on fire with His love, and tender with pity learned of Him.

So, dear friends! do not think that any organisation, any corporate activity, any substitution of vicarious service, will solve the problem. It will not. There is only one way of doing it, the old way that we must tread if we are going to do anything for God and our fellows: 'The priests repaired every one over against his house.'

Let me briefly point out some very plain and obvious things which bear upon this matter of individual action. Let me remind you that if you are a Christian man you have in your possession the thing which will cure the world's woe, and possession involves responsibility. What would you think of a man that had a specific for some pestilence that was raging in a city, and was contented to keep it for his own use, or at most for his family's use, when his brethren were dying by the thousand, and their corpses polluting the air? And what shall we say of men and women who call themselves Christians, who have some faith in that great Lord and His mighty sacrifice; who know that the men they meet with every day of their lives are dying for want of it, and who yet themselves do absolutely nothing to spread His name, and to heal men's hurts? What shall we say? God forbid that we should say they are not Christians! but God

forbid that anybody should flatter them with the notion that they are anything but most inconsistent Christians!

Still further, need I remind you that if we have found anything in Jesus Christ which has been peace and rest for ourselves, Christ has thereby called us to this work? He has found and saved us, not only for our own personal good. That, of course, is the prime purpose of our salvation, but not its exclusive purpose. He has saved us, too, in order that the Word may be spread through us to those beyond. 'The Kingdom of Heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal until the whole was leavened,' and every little bit of the dough, as it received into itself the leaven, and was transformed, became a medium for transmitting the transformation to the next particle beyond it and so the whole was at last permeated by the power. We get the grace for ourselves that we may pass it on; and as the Apostle says: 'God hath shined into our hearts that we might give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.'

And you *can* do it, you Christian men and women, every one of you, and preach Him to somebody. The possession of His love gives the commission; ay! and it gives the power. There is nothing so mighty as the confession of personal experience. Do not you think that when that first of Christian converts, and first of Christian preachers went to his brother, all full of what he had discovered, his simple saying, 'We have found the Messias,' was a better sermon than a far more elaborate proclamation would have been? My brother! if you have found Him, you can say so; and

if you can say so, and your character and your life confirm the words of your lips, you will have done more to spread His name than much eloquence and many an orator. All can preach who can say, 'We have found the Christ.'

The last word I have to say is this: there is no other body that can do it but you. They say:—'What an awful thing it is that there are no churches or chapels in these outcast districts!' If there were they would be what the churches and chapels are now—half empty. Bricks and mortar built up into ecclesiastical forms are not the way to evangelise this or any other country. It is a very easy thing to build churches and chapels. It is not such an easy thing—I believe it is an impossible thing (and that the sooner the Christian church gives up the attempt the better)—to get the godless classes into any church or chapel. Conducted on the principles upon which churches and chapels must needs at present be conducted, they are for another class altogether; and we had better recognise it, because then we shall feel that no multiplication of buildings like this in which we now are, for instance, is any direct contribution to the evangelisation of the waste spots of the country, except in so far as from a centre like this there ought to go out much influence which will originate direct missionary action in places and fashions adapted to the outlying community.

Professional work is not what we want. Any man, be he minister, clergyman, Bible-reader, city missionary, who goes among our godless population with the suspicion of pay about him is the weaker for that. What is needed besides is that ladies and gentlemen that are a little higher up in the social scale than these

poor creatures, should go to them themselves; and excavate and work. Preach, if you like, in the technical sense; have meetings, I suppose, necessarily; but the personal contact is the thing, the familiar talk, the simple exhibition of a loving Christian heart, and the unconventional proclamation in free conversation of the broad message of the love of God in Jesus Christ. Why, if all the people in this chapel who can do that would do it, and keep on doing it, who can tell what an influence would come from some hundreds of new workers for Christ? And why should the existence of a church in which the workers are as numerous as the Christians be an Utopian dream? It is simply the dream that perhaps a church might be conceived to exist, all the members of which had found out their plainest, most imperative duty, and were really trying to do it.

No carelessness, no indolence, no plea of timidity or business shift the obligation from your shoulders if you are a Christian. It is your business, and no paid agents can represent you. You cannot buy yourselves substitutes in Christ's army, as they used to do in the militia, by a guinea subscription. We are thankful for the money, because there are kinds of work to be done that unpaid effort will not do. But men ask for your money; Jesus Christ asks for yourself, for your work, and will not let you off as having done your duty because you have paid your subscription. No doubt there are some of you who, from various circumstances, cannot yourselves do work amongst the masses of the outcast population. Well, but you have got people by your side whom you can help. The question which I wish to ask of my Christian brethren and sisters now is this: Is there a man, woman, or child living

to whom you ever spoke a word about Jesus Christ? Is there? If not, do not you think it is time that you began?

There are people in your houses, people that sit by you in your counting-house, on your college benches, who work by your side in mill or factory or warehouse, who cross your path in a hundred ways, and God has given them to you that you may bring them to Him. Do you set yourself, dear brother, to work and try to bring them. Oh! if you lived nearer Jesus Christ you would catch the sacred fire from Him; and like a bit of cold iron lying beside a magnet, touching Him, you would yourselves become magnetic and draw men out of their evil and up to God.

Let me commend to you the old pattern: 'The priests repaired every one over against his house'; and beseech you to take the trowel and spade, or anything that comes handiest, and build, in the bit nearest you, some living stones on the true Foundation.

DISCOURAGEMENTS AND COURAGE

'Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God, and set a watch against them day and night, because of them.' 10. And Judah said, The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and there is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall. 11. And our adversaries said, They shall not know, neither see, till we come in the midst among them, and slay them, and cause the work to cease. 12. And it came to pass, that when the Jews which dwelt by them came, they said unto us ten times, From all places whence ye shall return unto us they will be upon you. 13. Therefore set I in the lower places behind the wall, and on the higher places, I even set the people after their families with their swords, their spears, and their bows. 14. And I looked and rose up, and said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, Be not ye afraid of them: remember the Lord, which is great and terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses. 15. And it came to pass, when our enemies heard that it was known unto us, and God had brought their counsel to nought, that we returned all of us to the wall, every one unto his work. 16. And it came to pass from that time forth, that the half of my servants wrought in the work, and the other half of them held both the spears, the shields, and the bows, and the habergeons; and the rulers were behind all the house of Judah. 17. They which builded on the wall, and they that bare burdens, with those that laded, every one with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand

held a weapon. 18. For the builders, every one had his sword girded by his side, and so builded. And he that sounded the trumpet was by me. 19. And I said unto the nobles, and to the rulers, and to the rest of the people, The work is great and large, and we are separated upon the wall, one far from another. 20. In what place therefore ye hear the sound of the trumpet, resort ye thither unto us: our God shall fight for us. 21. So we laboured in the work: and half of them held the spears from the rising of the morning till the stars appeared.'—
NEH. iv. 9-21.

COMMON hatred has a wonderful power of uniting former foes. Samaritans, wild Arabs of the desert, Ammonites, and inhabitants of Ashdod in the Philistine plain would have been brought together for no noble work, but mischief and malice fused them for a time into one. God's work is attacked from all sides. Herod and Pilate can shake hands over their joint antagonism.

This passage paints vividly the discouragements which are apt to dog all good work, and the courage which refuses to be discouraged, and conquers by bold persistence. The first verse (v. 9) may stand as a summary of the whole, though it refers to the preceding, not to the following, verses. The true way to meet opposition is twofold—prayer and prudent watchfulness. 'Pray to God, and keep your powder dry,' is not a bad compendium of the duty of a Christian soldier. The union of appeal to God with the full use of common sense, watchfulness, and prudence, would dissipate many hindrances to successful service.

I. In verses 10-12 Nehemiah tells, in his simple way of the difficulties from three several quarters which threatened to stop his work. He had trouble from the workmen, from the enemies, and from the mass of Jews not resident in Jerusalem. The enthusiasm of the builders had cooled, and the magnitude of their task began to frighten them. Verse 6 tells us that the wall was completed 'unto the half of it'; that is, to one-half the height, and half-way through is just the

critical time in all protracted work. The fervour of beginning has passed; the animation from seeing the end at hand has not sprung up. There is a dreary stretch in the centre, where it takes much faith and self-command to plod on unfainting. Half-way to Australia from England is the region of sickening calms. It is easier to work in the fresh morning or in the cool evening than at midday. So in every great movement there are short-winded people who sit down and pant very soon, and their prudence croaks out undeniable facts. No doubt strength does become exhausted; no doubt there is 'much rubbish' (literally 'dust'). What then? The conclusion drawn is not so unquestionable as the premises. 'We cannot build the wall.' Why not? Have you not built half of it? And was not the first half more embarrassed by rubbish than the second will be?

It is a great piece of Christian duty to recognise difficulties, and not be cowed by them. The true inference from the facts would have been, 'so that we must put all our strength into the work, and trust in our God to help us.' We may not be responsible for discouragements suggesting themselves, but we are responsible for letting them become dissuatives. Our one question should be, Has God appointed the work? If so, it has to be done, however little our strength, and however mountainous the accumulations of rubbish.

The second part in the trio was taken by the enemies—Sanballat and Tobiah and the rest. They laid their plans for a sudden swoop down on Jerusalem, and calculated that, if they could surprise the builders at their work, they would have no weapons to show fight with, and so would be easily despatched. Killing the builders was but a means; the desired end is signifi-

cantly put last (v. 11), as being the stopping of the abhorred work. But killing the workmen does not cause the work to cease when it is God's work, as the history of the Church in all ages shows. Conspirators should hold their tongues. It was not a hopeful way of beginning an attack, of which the essence was secrecy and suddenness, to talk about it. 'A bird of the air carries the matter.'

The third voice is that of the Jews in other parts of the land, and especially those living on the borders of Samaria, next door to Sanballat. Verse 12 is probably best taken as in the Revised Version, which makes 'Ye must return to us' the imperative and often-repeated summons from these to the contingents from their respective places of abode, who had gone up to Jerusalem to help in building. Alarms of invasion made the scattered villagers wish to have all their men capable of bearing arms back again to defend their own homes. It was a most natural demand, but in this case, as so often, audacity is truest prudence; and in all high causes there come times when men have to trust their homes and dear ones to God's protection. The necessity is heartrending, and we may well pray that we may not be exposed to it; but if it clearly arises, a devout man can have no doubt of his duty. How many American citizens had to face it in the great Civil War! And how character is ennobled by even so severe a sacrifice!

II. The calm heroism of Nehemiah and his wise action in the emergency are told in verses 13-15. He made a demonstration in force, which at once showed that the scheme of a surprise was blown to pieces. It is difficult to make out the exact localities in which he planted his men. 'The lower places behind the wall' probably

means the points at which the new fortifications were lowest, which would be the most exposed to assault; and the 'higher places' (Auth. Ver.), or 'open places' (Rev. Ver.), describes the same places from another point of view. They afforded room for posting troops because they were without buildings. At any rate, the walls were manned, and the enemy would have to deal, not with unarmed labourers, but with prepared soldiers. The work was stopped, and trowel and spade exchanged for sword and spear. 'And I looked,' says Nehemiah. His careful eye travelled over the lines, and, seeing all in order, he cheered the little army with ringing words. He had prayed (Neh. i. 5) to 'the great and terrible God,' and now he bids his men remember Him, and thence draw strength and courage. The only real antagonist of fear is faith. If we can grasp God, we shall not dread Sanballat and his crew. Unless we do, the world is full of dangers which it is not folly to fear.

Note, too, that the people are animated for the fight by reminding them of the dear ones whose lives and honour hung on the issue. Nothing is said about fighting for God and His Temple and city, but the motives adduced are not less sacred. Family love is God's best of earthly gifts, and, though it is sometimes duty to 'forget thine own people, and thy father's house,' as we have just seen, nothing short of these highest obligations can supersede the sweet one of straining every nerve for the well-being of dear ones in the hallowed circle of home.

So the plan of a sudden rush came to nothing. It does not appear that the enemy was in sight; but the news of the demonstration soon reached them, and was effectual. Prompt preparation against possible

dangers is often the means of turning them aside. Watchfulness is indispensable to vigour of Christian character and efficiency of work. Suspicion is hateful and weakening; but a man who tries to serve God in such a world as this had need to be like the living creatures in the Revelation, having 'eyes all over.' 'Blessed is the man that [in that sense] feareth always.'

The upshot of the alarm is very beautifully told: 'We returned all of us to the wall, every one unto his work.' No time was wasted in jubilation. The work was the main thing, and the moment the interruption was ended, back to it they all went. It is a fine illustration of persistent discharge of duty, and of that most valuable quality, the ability and inclination to keep up the main purpose of a life continuous through interruptions, like a stream of sweet water running through a bog.

III. The remainder of the passage tells us of the standing arrangements made in consequence of the alarm (vs. 16-21). First we hear what Nehemiah did with his own special 'servants,' whether these were slaves who had accompanied him from Shushan (as Stanley supposes), or his body-guard as a Persian official. He divided them into two parts—one to work, one to watch. But he did not carry out this plan with the mass of the people, probably because it would have too largely diminished the number of builders. So he armed them all. The labourers who carried stones, mortar, and the like, could do their work after a fashion with one hand, and so they had a weapon in the other. If they worked in pairs, that would be all the easier. The actual builders needed both hands, and so they had swords stuck in their girdles.

No doubt such arrangements hindered progress, but they were necessary. The lesson often drawn from them is no doubt true, that God's workers must be prepared for warfare as well as building. There have been epochs in which that necessity was realised in a very sad manner; and the Church on earth will always have to be the Church militant. But it is well to remember that building is the end, and fighting is but the means. The trowel, not the sword, is the natural instrument. Controversy is second best—a necessity, no doubt, but an unwelcome one, and only permissible as a subsidiary help to doing the true work, rearing the walls of the city of God.

‘He that soundeth the trumpet was by me.’ The gallant leader was everywhere, animating by his presence. He meant to be in the thick of the fight, if it should come. And so he kept the trumpeter by his side, and gave orders that when he sounded all should hurry to the place; for there the enemy would be, and Nehemiah would be where they were. ‘The work is great and large, and we are separated . . . one far from another.’ How naturally the words lend themselves to the old lesson so often drawn from them! God's servants are widely parted, by distance, by time, and, alas! by less justifiable causes. Unless they draw together they will be overwhelmed, taken in detail, and crushed. They must rally to help each other against the common foe.

Thank God! the longing for manifest Christian unity is deeper to-day than ever it was. But much remains to be done before it is adequately fulfilled in the recognition of the common bond of brotherhood, which binds us all in one family, if we have one Father. English and American Christians are bound to seek

the tightening of the bonds between them and to set themselves against politicians who may seek to keep apart those who both in the flesh and in the spirit are brothers. All Christians have one great Captain; and He will be in the forefront of every battle. His clear trumpet-call should gather all His servants to His side.

The closing verse tells again how Nehemiah's immediate dependants divided work and watching, and adds to the picture the continuousness of their toil from the first grey of morning till darkness showed the stars and ended another day of toil. Happy they who thus 'from morn till noon, from noon till dewy eve,' labour in the work of the Lord! For them, every new morning will dawn with new strength, and every evening be calm with the consciousness of 'something attempted, something done.'

AN ANCIENT NONCONFORMIST

' . . . So did not I, because of the fear of God.'—NEH. v. 15.

I DO not suppose that the ordinary Bible-reader knows very much about Nehemiah. He is one of the neglected great men of Scripture. He was no prophet, he had no glowing words, he had no lofty visions, he had no special commission, he did not live in the heroic age. There was a certain harshness and dryness; a tendency towards what, when it was more fully developed, became Pharisaism, in the man, which somewhat covers the essential nobleness of his character. But he was brave, cautious, circumspect, disinterested; and he had Jerusalem in his heart.

The words that I have read are a little fragment of his autobiography which deal with a prosaic enough matter, but carry in them large principles. When he was appointed governor of the little colony of returned exiles in Palestine, he found that his predecessors, like Turkish pashas and Chinese mandarins to-day, had been in the habit of 'squeezing' the people of their Government, and that they had requisitioned sufficient supplies of provisions to keep the governor's table well spread. It was the custom. Nobody would have wondered if Nehemiah had conformed to it; but he felt that he must have his hands clean. Why did he not do what everybody else had done in like circumstances? His answer is beautifully simple: 'Because of the fear of God.' His religion went down into the little duties of common life, and imposed upon him a standard far above the maxims that were prevalent round about him. And so, if you will take these words, and disengage them from the small matter concerning which they were originally spoken, I think you will find in them thoughts as to the attitude which we should take to prevalent practices, the motive which should impel us to a sturdy non-compliance, and the power which will enable us to walk on a solitary road. 'So did not I, because of the fear of God.' Now, then, these are my three points:—

I. The attitude to prevalent practices.

Nehemiah would not conform. And unless you can say 'No!' and do it very often, your life will be shattered from the beginning. That non-compliance with customary maxims and practices is the beginning, or, at least, one of the foundation-stones, of all nobleness and strength, of all blessedness and power. Of course it is utterly impossible for a man to denude

himself of the influences that are brought to bear upon him by the circumstances in which he lives, and the trend of opinion, and the maxims and practices of the world, in the corner, and at the time, in which his lot is cast. But, on the other hand, be sure of this, that unless you are in a very deep and not at all a technical sense of the word, 'Nonconformists,' you will come to no good. None! It is so easy to do as others do, partly because of laziness, partly because of cowardice, partly because of the instinctive imitation which is in us all. Men are gregarious. One great teacher has drawn an illustration from a flock of sheep, and says that if we hold up a stick, and the first of the flock jumps over it, and then if we take away the stick, all the rest of the flock will jump when they come to the point where the first did so. A great many of us adopt our creeds and opinions, and shape our lives for no better reason than because people round us are thinking in a certain direction, and living in a certain way. It saves a great deal of trouble, and it gratifies a certain strange instinct that is in us all, and it avoids dangers and conflicts that we should, when we are at Rome, do as the Romans do. 'So did not I, because of the fear of God.'

Now, brethren! I ask you to take this plain principle of the necessity of non-compliance (which I suppose I do not need to do much to establish, because, theoretically, we most of us admit it), and apply it all round the circumference of your lives. Apply it to your opinions. There is no tyranny like the tyranny of a majority in a democratic country like ours. It is quite as harsh as the tyranny of the old-fashioned despots. Unless you resolve steadfastly to see with your own eyes, to use your own brains, to stand on your own

feet, to be a voice and not an echo, you will be helplessly enslaved by the fashion of the hour, and the opinions that prevail.

‘What everybody says’—perhaps—‘is true.’ What most people say, at any given time, is very likely to be false. Truth has always lived with minorities, so do not let the current of widespread opinion sweep you away, but try to have a mind of your own, and not to be brow-beaten or overborne because the majority of the people round about you are giving utterance, and it may be unmeasured utterance, to any opinions.

Now, there is one direction in which I wish to urge that especially—and now I speak mainly to the young men in my congregation—and that is, in regard to the attitude that so many amongst us are taking to Christian truth. If you have honestly thought out the subject to the best of your ability, and have come to conclusions diverse from those which men like me hold dearer than their lives, that is another matter. But I know that very widely there is spread to-day the fashion of unbelief. So many influential men, leaders of opinion, teachers and preachers, are giving up the old-fashioned Evangelical faith, that it takes a strong man to say that he sticks by it. It is a poor reason to give for your attitude, that unbelief is in the air, and nobody believes those old doctrines now. That may be. There are currents of opinion that are transitory, and that is one of them, depend upon it. But at all events do not be fooled out of your faith, as some of you are tending to be, for no better reason than because other people have given it up. An iceberg lowers the temperature all round it, and the iceberg of unbelief is amongst us to-day, and it has chilled

a great many people who could not tell why they have lost the fervour of their faith.

On the other hand, let me remind you that a mere traditional religion, which is only orthodox because other people are so, and has not verified its beliefs by personal experience, is quite as deleterious as an imitative unbelief. Doubtless, I speak to some who plume themselves on 'never having been affected by these currents of popular opinion,' but whose unblemished and unquestioned orthodoxy has no more vitality in it than the other people's heterodoxy. The one man has said, 'What is everywhere always, and by all believed, I believe'; and the other man has said, 'What the select spirits of this day disbelieve, I disbelieve,' and the belief of one and the unbelief of the other are equally worthless, and really identical.

But it is not only, nor mainly, in reference to opinion that I would urge upon you this nonconformity with prevalent practices as the measure of most that is noble in us. I dare not talk to you as if I knew much about the details of Manchester commercial life, but I can say this much, that it is no excuse for shady practices in your trade to say, 'It is the custom of the trade, and everybody does it.' Nehemiah might have said: 'There never was a governor yet but took his forty shekels a day's worth'—about £1,800 of our money—'of provisions from these poor people, and I am not going to give it up because of a scruple. It is the custom, and because it is the custom I can do it.' I am not going into details. It is commonly understood that preachers know nothing about business; that may be true, or it may not. But this, I am sure, is a word in season for some of my friends this evening—do not hide behind the trade. Come out into the

open, and deal with the questions of morality involved in your commercial life, as you will have to deal with them hereafter, by yourself. Never mind about other people. 'Oh,' but you say, 'that involves loss.' Very likely! Nehemiah was a poorer man because he fed all these one hundred and fifty Jews at his table, but he did not mind that. It may involve loss, but you will keep God, and that is gain.

Turn this searchlight in another direction. I see a number of young people in my congregation at this moment, young men who are perhaps just beginning their career in this city, and who possibly have been startled when they heard the kind of talk that was going on at the next desk, or from the man that sits beside them on the benches at College. Do not be tempted to follow that multitude to do evil. Unless you are prepared to say 'No!' to a great deal that will be pushed into your face in this great city, as sure as you are living you will make shipwreck of your lives. Do you think that in the forty years and more that I have stood here I have not seen successive generations of young men come into Manchester? I could people many of these pews with the faces of such, who came here buoyant, full of hope, full of high resolves, and with a mother's benediction hanging over their heads, and who got into a bad set, and had not the strength to say 'No,' and they went down and down and down, and then presently somebody asked, 'Where is so-and-so?' 'Oh! his health broke down, and he has gone home to die.' 'His bones are full of the iniquity of his youth'—and he made shipwreck of prospects and of life, because he did not pull himself together when the temptation came, and say, 'So did not I, because of the fear of God.'

II. Now let me ask you to turn with me to the second thought that my text suggests to me; that is,

The motive that impels to this sturdy non-compliance.

Nehemiah puts it in Old Testament phraseology, 'the fear of God'; the New Testament equivalent is 'the love of Christ.' And if you want to take the power and the life out of both phrases, in order to find a modern conventional equivalent, you will say 'religion.' I prefer the old-fashioned language. 'The love of Christ' impels to this non-compliance. Now, my point is this, that Jesus Christ requires from each of us that we shall abstain, restrict ourselves, refuse to do a great many things that are being done round us.

I need not remind you of how continually He spoke about taking up the cross. I need not do more than just remind you of His parable of the two ways, but ask you, whilst you think of it, to note that all the characteristics of each of the ways which He sets forth are given by Him as reasons for refusing the one and walking in the other. For example, 'Enter ye in at the strait gate, for strait is the gate'—that is a reason for going in; 'and narrow is the way'—that is a reason for going in; 'and few there be that find it'—that is a reason for going in. 'Wide is the gate'—that is a reason for stopping out; 'and broad is the way'—that is a reason for stopping out; 'and many there be that go in thereat'—that is a reason for stopping out. Is not that what I said, that the minority is generally right and the majority wrong? Just because there are so many people on the path, suspect it, and expect that the path with fewer travellers is probably the better and the higher.

But to pass from that, what did Jesus Christ mean

by His continual contrast between His disciples and the world? What did He mean by 'the world'? This fair universe, with all its possibilities of help and blessing, and all its educational influences? By no means. He meant by 'the world' the aggregate of things and men considered as separate from God. And when He applied the term to men only, He meant by it very much what we mean when we talk about society. Society is not organised on Christian principles; we all know that, and until it is, if a man is going to be a Christian he must not conform to the world. 'Know ye not that whosoever is a friend of the world is an enemy of God.'

I would press upon you, dear friends! that our Christianity is nothing unless it leads us to a standard, and a course of conduct in conformity with that standard, which will be in diametrical opposition to a great deal of what is patted on the back, and petted and praised by society. Now, there is an easy-going kind of Christianity which does not recognise that, and which is in great favour with many people to-day, and is called 'liberality' and 'breadth,' and 'conciliating and commending Christianity to outsiders,' and I know not what besides. Well, Christ's words seem to me to come down like a hammer upon that sort of thing. Depend upon it, 'the world'—I mean by that the aggregate of godless men organised as they are in society—does not think much of these trimmers. It may dislike an out-and-out Christian, but it knows him when it sees him, and it has a kind of hostile respect for him which the other people will never get. You remember the story of the man that was seeking for a coachman, and whose question to each applicant was, 'How near can you drive to the edge of a precipice?'

He took the man who said: 'I would keep away from it as far as I could.' And the so-called Christian people that seem to be bent on showing how much their lives can be made to assimilate to the lives of men that have no sympathy with their creeds, are like the rash Jehus that tried to go as near the edge as they could. But the consistent Christian will keep as far away from it as he can. There are some of us who seem as if we were most anxious to show that we, whose creed is absolutely inconsistent with the world's practices, can live lives which are all but identical with these practices. Jesus Christ says, through the lips of His Apostle, what He often said in other language by His own lips when He was here on earth: 'Be ye not conformed to the world.'

Surely such a command as that, just because it involves difficulty, self-restraint, self-denial, and sometimes self-crucifixion, ought to appeal, and does appeal, to all that is noble in humanity, in a fashion that that smooth, easy-going gospel of living on the level of the people round us never can do. For remember that Christ's commandment not to be conformed to the world is the consequence of His commandment to be conformed to Himself. 'Thus did not I' comes second; 'This one thing I do' comes first. You will misunderstand the whole genius of the Gospel if you suppose that, as a law of life, it is perpetually pulling men short up, and saying: Don't, don't, don't! There is a Christianity of that sort which is mainly prohibition and restriction, but it is not Christ's Christianity. He begins by enjoining: 'This do in remembrance of Me,' and the man that has accepted that commandment must necessarily say, as he looks out on the world, and its practices: 'So did not I, because of the fear of God.'

III. And now one last word—my text not only suggests the motive which impels to this non-compliance, but also the power which enables us to exercise it.

‘The fear of God,’ or, taking the New Testament equivalent, ‘the love of Christ,’ makes it possible for a man, with all his weakness and dependence on surroundings, with all his instinctive desire to be like the folk that are near him, to take that brave attitude, and to refuse to be one of the crowd that runs after evil and lies. I have no time to dwell upon this aspect of my subject, as I should be glad to have done. Let me sum up in a sentence or two what I would have said. Christ will enable you to take this necessary attitude because, in Himself He gives you the Example which it is always safe to follow. The instinct of imitation is planted in us for a good end, and because it is in us, examples of nobility appeal to us. And because it is in us Jesus Christ has lived the life that it is possible for, and therefore incumbent on, us to live. It is safe to imitate Him, and it is easy not to do as men do, if once our main idea is to do as Christ did.

He makes it possible for us, because He gives the strongest possible motive for the life that He prescribes. As the Apostle puts it, ‘Ye are bought with a price, be not the servants of men.’ There is nothing that will so deliver us from the tyranny of majorities, and of what we call general opinion and ordinary custom, as to feel that we belong to Him because He died for us. Men become very insignificant when Christ speaks, and the charter of our freedom from them lies in our redemption by the blood of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ being our Redeemer is our Judge, and

moment by moment He is estimating our conduct, and judging our actions as they are done. 'With me it is a very small matter to be judged of you or of man's judgment. He that judgeth me is the Lord.' Never mind what the people round you say; you do not take your orders from them, and you do not answer to them. Like some official abroad, appointed by the Crown, you do not report to the local authorities; you report to headquarters, and what He thinks about you is the only important thing. So 'the fear of man which bringeth a snare' dwindles down into very minute dimensions when we think of the Pattern, the Redeemer and the Judge to whom we give account.

And so, dear friends! if we will only open our hearts, by quiet humble faith, for the coming of Jesus Christ into our lives, then we shall be able to resist, to refuse compliance, to stand firm, though alone. The servant of Christ is the master of all men. 'All things are yours, whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas—all are yours, and ye are Christ's.'

READING THE LAW WITH TEARS AND JOY

And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water gate; and they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded to Israel. 2. And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month. 3. And he read therein before the street that was before the water gate, from the morning until midday, before the men and the women, and those that could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law. 4. And Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of wood, which they had made for the purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, and Shema, and Ananiah, and Urijah, and Hilkiah, and Maaseiah, on his right hand; and on his left hand Pedaliah, and Mishaël, and Malchiah, and Hashum, and Hashbadana, Zechariah, and Meshullam. 5. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people; (for he was above all the people); and when he opened it, all the people stood up: 6. And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. 7. Also Jeshua, and Bani, and Sherebiah, Jemin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites, caused the

people to understand the law: and the people stood in their place. 8. So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading. 9. And Nehemiah, which is the Tirshatha, and Ezra the priest the scribe, and the Levites that taught the people, said unto all the people, This day is holy unto the Lord your God; mourn not, nor weep. For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law. 10. Then he said unto them, Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared: for this day is holy unto our Lord: neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the Lord is your strength. 11. So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, Hold your peace, for the day is holy; neither be ye grieved. 12. And all the people went their way to eat, and to drink, and to send portions, and to make great mirth, because they had understood the words that were declared unto them.'—NEH. viii. 1-12.

THE wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, which was the sixth month. The events recorded in this passage took place on the first day of the seventh month. The year is not given, but the natural inference is that it was the same as that of the finishing of the wall; namely, the twentieth of Artaxerxes. If so, the completion of the fortifications to which Nehemiah had set himself, was immediately followed by this reading of the law, in which Ezra takes the lead. The two men stand in a similar relative position to that of Zerubbabel and Joshua, the one representing the civil and the other the religious authority.

According to Ezra vii. 9, Ezra had gone to Jerusalem about thirteen years before Nehemiah, and had had a weary time of fighting against the corruptions which had crept in among the returned captives. The arrival of Nehemiah would be hailed as bringing fresh, young enthusiasm, none the less welcome and powerful because it had the king's authority entrusted to it. Evidently the two men thoroughly understood one another, and pulled together heartily. We heard nothing about Ezra while the wall was being built. But now he is the principal figure, and Nehemiah is barely mentioned. The reasons for Ezra's taking the prominent part in the reading of the law are given in the

two titles by which he is designated in two successive verses (vers. 1, 2). He was 'the scribe' and also 'the priest,' and in both capacities was the natural person for such a work.

The seventh month was the festival month of the year, its first day being that of the Feast of trumpets, and the great Feast of tabernacles as well as the solemn day of atonement occurring in it. Possibly, the prospect of the coming of the times for these celebrations may have led to the people's wish to hear the law, that they might duly observe the appointed ceremonial. At all events, the first thing to note is that it was in consequence of the people's wish that the law was read in their hearing. Neither Ezra nor Nehemiah originated the gathering together. They obeyed a popular impulse which they had not created. We must not, indeed, give the multitude credit for much more than the wish to have their ceremonial right. But there was at least that wish, and possibly something deeper and more spiritual. The walls were completed; but the true defence of Israel was in God, and the condition of His defending was Israel's obedience to His law. The people were, in some measure, beginning to realise that condition with new clearness, in consequence of the new fervour which Nehemiah had brought.

It is singular that, during his thirteen years of residence, Ezra is not recorded to have promulgated the law, though it lay at the basis of the drastic reforms which he was able to carry through. Probably he had not been silent, but the solemn public recitation of the law was felt to be appropriate on occasion of completing the wall. Whether the people had heard it before, or, as seems implied, it was strange to them, their desire to hear it may stand as a pattern for us of

that earnest wish to know God's will which is never cherished in vain. He who does not intend to obey does not wish to know the law. If we have no longing to know what the will of the Lord is, we may be very sure that we prefer our own to His. If we desire to know it, we shall desire to understand the Book which contains so much of it. Any true religion in the heart will make us eager to perceive, and willing to be guided by, the will of God, revealed mainly in Scripture, in the Person, works, and words of Jesus, and also in waiting hearts by the Spirit, and in those things which the world calls 'circumstances' and faith names 'providences.'

II. Verses 2-8 appear to tell the same incidents twice over—first, more generally in verses 2 and 3, and then more minutely. Such expanded repetition is characteristic of the Old Testament historical style. It is somewhat difficult to make sure of the real circumstances. Clearly enough there was a solemn assembly of men, women, and children in a great open space outside one of the gates, and there, from dawn till noon, the law was read and explained. But whether Ezra read it all, while the Levites named in verse 7 explained or paraphrased or translated it, or whether they all read in turns, or whether there were a number of groups, each of which had a teacher who both read and expounded, is hard to determine. At all events, Ezra was the principal figure, and began the reading.

It was a picturesque scene. The sun, rising over the slopes of Olivet, would fall on the gathered crowd, if the water-gate was, as is probable, on the east or south-east side of the city. Beneath the fresh fortifications probably, which would act as a sounding-board for the reader, was set up a scaffold high above the

crowd, large enough to hold Ezra and thirteen supporters—principal men, no doubt—seven on one side of him and six on the other. Probably a name has dropped out, and the numbers were equal. There, in the morning light, with the new walls for a background, stood Ezra on his rostrum, and amid reverent silence, lifted high the sacred roll. A common impulse swayed the crowd, and brought them all to their feet—token at once of respect and obedient attention. Probably many of them had never seen a sacred roll. To them all it was comparatively unfamiliar. No wonder that, as Ezra's voice rose in prayer, the whole assembly fell on their faces in adoration, and every lip responded 'Amen! amen!'

Much superstition may have mingled with the reverence. No doubt, there was then what we are often solemnly warned against now, bibliolatriy. But in this time of critical investigation it is not the divine element in Scripture which is likely to be exaggerated; and few are likely to go wrong in the direction of paying too much reverence to the Book in which, as is still believed, God has revealed His will and Himself. While welcoming all investigations which throw light on its origin or its meaning, and perfectly recognising the human element in it, we should learn the lesson taught by that waiting crowd prone on their faces, and blessing God for His word. Such attitude must ever precede reading it, if we are to read aright.

Hour after hour the recitation went on. We must let the question of the precise form of the events remain undetermined. It is somewhat singular that thirteen names are enumerated as of the men who stood by Ezra, and thirteen as those of the readers or expounders. It may be the case that the former

number is complete, though uneven, and that there was some reason unknown for dividing the audience into just so many sections. The second set of thirteen was not composed of the same men as the first. They seem to have been Levites, whose office of assisting at the menial parts of the sacrifices was now elevated into that of setting forth the law. Probably the portions read were such as bore especially on ritual, though the tears of the listeners are sufficient proof that they had heard some things that went deeper than that.

The word rendered 'distinctly' in the Revised Version (margin, *with an interpretation*) is ambiguous, and may either mean that the Levites explained or that they translated the words. The former is the more probable, as there is no reason to suppose that the audience, most of whom had been born in the land, were ignorant of Hebrew. But if the ritual had been irregularly observed, and the circle of ideas in the law become unfamiliar, many explanations would be necessary. It strikes one as touching and strange that such an assembly should be needed after so many centuries of national existence. It sums up in one vivid picture the sin and suffering of the nation. To observe that law had been the condition of their prosperity. To bind it on their hearts should have been their delight and would have been their life; and here, after all these generations, the best of the nation are assembled, so ignorant of it that they cannot even understand it when they hear it. Absorption with worldly things has an awful power of dulling spiritual apprehension. Neglect of God's law weakens the power of understanding it.

This scene was in the truest sense a 'revival.' We may learn the true way of bringing men back to God;

namely, the faithful exposition and enforcement of God's will and word. We may learn, too, what should be the aim of public teachers of religion; namely, first and foremost, the clear setting forth of God's truth. Their first business is to 'give the sense, so that they understand the reading'; and that, not for merely intellectual purposes, but that, like the crowd outside the water-gate on that hot noonday, men may be moved to penitence, and then lifted to the joy of the Lord.

The first day of the seventh month was the Feast of trumpets; and when the reading was over, and its effects of tears and sorrow for disobedience were seen, the preachers changed their tone, to bring consolation and exhort to gladness. Nehemiah had taken no part in reading the law, as Ezra the priest and his Levites were more appropriately set to that. But he joins them in exhorting the people to dry their tears, and go joyfully to the feast. These exhortations contain many thoughts universally applicable. They teach that even those who are most conscious of sin and breaches of God's law should weep indeed, but should swiftly pass from tears to joy. They do not teach how that passage is to be effected; and in so far they are imperfect, and need to be supplemented by the New Testament teaching of forgiveness through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. But in their clear discernment that sorrow is not meant to be a permanent characteristic of religion, and that gladness is a more acceptable offering than tears, they teach a valuable lesson, needed always by men who fancy that they must atone for their sins by their own sadness, and that religion is gloomy, harsh, and crabbed.

Further, these exhortations to festal gladness breathe the characteristic Old Testament tone of wholesome

enjoyment of material good as a part of religion. The way of looking at eating and drinking and the like, as capable of being made acts of worship, has been too often forgotten by two kinds of men—saints who have sought sanctity in asceticism; and sensualists who have taken deep draughts of such pleasures without calling on the name of the Lord, and so have failed to find His gifts a cup of salvation. It is possible to ‘eat and drink and see God,’ as the elders of Israel did on Sinai.

Further, the plain duty of remembering the needy while we enjoy God’s gifts is beautifully enjoined here. The principle underlying the commandment to ‘send portions to them for whom nothing is provided’—that is, for whom no feast has been dressed—is that all gifts are held in trust, that nothing is bestowed on us for our own good only, but that we are in all things stewards. The law extends to the smallest and to the greatest possessions. We have no right to feast on anything unless we share it, whether it be festal dainties or the bread that came down from heaven. To divide our portion with others is the way to make our portion greater as well as sweeter.

Further, ‘the joy of the Lord is your strength.’ By *strength* here seems to be meant a *stronghold*. If we fix our desires on God, and have trained our hearts to find sweeter delights in communion with Him than in any earthly good, our religion will have lifted us above mists and clouds into clear air above, where sorrows and changes will have little power to affect us. If we are to rejoice in the Lord, it will be possible for us to ‘rejoice always,’ and that joy will be as a refuge from all the ills that flesh is heir to. Dwelling in God, we shall dwell safely, and be far from the fear of evil.

THE JOY OF THE LORD

'The joy of the Lord is your strength.'—NEH. viii. 10.

JUDAISM, in its formal and ceremonial aspect, was a religion of gladness. The feast was the great act of worship. It is not to be wondered at, that Christianity, the perfecting of that ancient system, has been less markedly felt to be a religion of joy; for it brings with it far deeper and more solemn views about man in his nature, condition, responsibilities, destinies, than ever prevailed before, under any system of worship. And yet all deep religion ought to be joyful, and all strong religion assuredly will be so.

Here, in the incident before us, there has come a time in Nehemiah's great enterprise, when the law, long forgotten, long broken by the captives, is now to be established again as the rule of the newly-founded commonwealth. Naturally enough there comes a remembrance of many sins in the past history of the people; and tears not unnaturally mingle with the thankfulness that again they are a nation, having a divine worship and a divine law in their midst. The leader of them, knowing for one thing that if the spirits of his people once began to flag, they could not face nor conquer the difficulties of their position, said to them, 'This day is holy unto the Lord: this feast that we are keeping is a day of devout worship; therefore mourn not, nor weep: go your way; eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared; neither be ye sorry, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.' You will make nothing of it by indulgence in lamentation and in mourning. You will have no more power for

obedience, you will not be fit for your work, if you fall into a desponding state. Be thankful and glad; and remember that the purest worship is the worship of God-fixed joy, 'the joy of the Lord is your strength.' And that is as true, brethren! with regard to us, as it ever was in these old times; and we, I think, need the lesson contained in this saying of Nehemiah's, because of some prevalent tendencies amongst us, no less than these Jews did. Take some simple thoughts suggested by this text which are both important in themselves and needful to be made emphatic because so often forgotten in the ordinary type of Christian character. They are these. Religious Joy is the natural result of faith. It is a Christian duty. It is an important element in Christian strength.

I. Joy in the Lord is the natural result of Christian Faith.

There is a natural adaptation or provision in the Gospel, both by what it brings to us and by what it takes away from us, to make a calm, and settled, and deep gladness, the prevalent temper of the Christian spirit. In what it gives us, I say, and in what it takes away from us. It gives us what we call well a sense of acceptance with God, it gives us God for the rest of our spirits, it gives us the communion with Him which in proportion as it is real, will be still, and in proportion as it is still, will be all bright and joyful. It takes away from us the fear that lies before us, the strifes that lie within us, the desperate conflict that is waged between a man's conscience and his inclinations, between his will and his passions, which tears the heart asunder, and always makes sorrow and tumult wherever it comes. It takes away the sense of sin. It gives us, instead of the

torpid conscience, or the angrily-stinging conscience—a conscience all calm from its accusations, with all the sting drawn out of it:—for quiet peace lies in the heart of the man that is trusting in the Lord. The Gospel works joy, because the soul is at rest in God; joy, because every function of the spiritual nature has found now its haven and its object; joy, because health has come, and the healthy working of the body or of the spirit is itself a gladness; joy, because the dim future is painted (where it is painted at all) with shapes of light and beauty, and because the very vagueness of these is an element in the greatness of its revelation. The joy that is in Christ is deep and abiding. Faith in Him naturally works gladness.

I do not forget that, on the other side, it is equally true that the Christian faith has as marked and almost as strong an adaptation to produce a solemn sorrow—solemn, manly, noble, and strong. ‘As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing,’ is the rule of the Christian life. If we think of what our faith does; of the light that it casts upon our condition, upon our nature, upon our responsibilities, upon our sins, and upon our destinies, we can easily see how, if gladness be one part of its operation, no less really and truly is sadness another. Brethren! all great thoughts have a solemn quiet in them, which not unfrequently merges into a still sorrow. There is nothing more contemptible in itself, and there is no more sure mark of a trivial nature and a trivial round of occupations, than unshaded gladness, that rests on no deep foundations of quiet, patient grief; grief, because I know what I am and what I ought to be; grief, because I have learnt the ‘exceeding sinfulness of sin’; grief, because, looking

out upon the world, I see, as other men do not see, hell-fire burning at the back of the mirth and the laughter, and know what it is that men are hurrying to! Do you remember who it was that stood by the side of the one poor dumb man, whose tongue He was going to loose, and looking up to heaven, *sighed* before He could say, 'Be opened'? Do you remember that of Him it is said, 'God hath anointed Thee with the oil of gladness above Thy fellows'; and also, 'a Man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief'? And do you not think that both these characteristics are to be repeated in the operations of His Gospel upon every heart that receives it? And if, by the hopes it breathes into us, by the fears that it takes away from us, by the union with God that it accomplishes for us, by the fellowship that it implants in us, it indeed anoints us all 'with the oil of gladness'; yet, on the other hand, by the sense of mine own sin that it teaches me; by the conflict with weakness which it makes to be the law of my life; by the clear vision which it gives me of 'the law of my members warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into subjection'; by the intensity which it breathes into all my nature, and by the thoughts that it presents of what sin leads to, and what the world at present is, the Gospel, wheresoever it comes, will infuse a wise, valiant sadness as the very foundation of character. Yes, joy, but sorrow too! the joy of the Lord, but sorrow as we look on our own sin and the world's woe! the head anointed with the oil of gladness, but also crowned with thorns!

These two are not contradictory. These two states of mind, both of them the natural operations of any deep faith, may co-exist and blend into one another, so as that the gladness is sobered, and chastened, and made manly

and noble; and that the sorrow is like some thunder-cloud, all streaked with bars of sunshine, that pierce into its deepest depths. The joy lives in the midst of the sorrow; the sorrow springs from the same root as the gladness. The two do not clash against each other, or reduce the emotion to a neutral indifference, but they blend into one another; just as, in the Arctic regions, deep down beneath the cold snow, with its white desolation and its barren death, you will find the budding of the early spring flowers and the fresh green grass; just as some kinds of fire burn below the water; just as, in the midst of the barren and undrinkable sea, there may be welling up some little fountain of fresh water that comes from a deeper depth than the great ocean around it, and pours its sweet streams along the surface of the salt waste. Gladness, because I love, for love is gladness; gladness, because I trust, for trust is gladness; gladness, because I obey, for obedience is a meat that others know not of, and light comes when we do His will! But sorrow, because still I am wrestling with sin; sorrow, because still I have not perfect fellowship; sorrow, because mine eye, purified by my living with God, sees earth, and sin, and life, and death, and the generations of men, and the darkness beyond, in some measure as God sees them! And yet, the sorrow is surface, and the joy is central; the sorrow springs from circumstance, and the gladness from the essence of the thing;—and therefore the sorrow is transitory, and the gladness is perennial. For the Christian life is all like one of those sweet spring showers in early April, when the rain-drops weave for us a mist that hides the sunshine; and yet the hidden sun is in every sparkling drop, and they are all saturated and steeped in its light. ‘The joy of the

Lord is the natural result and offspring of all Christian faith.

II. And now, secondly, the 'joy of the Lord' or rejoicing in God, is a matter of Christian duty.

It is a commandment here, and it is a command in the New Testament as well. 'Neither be ye sorry, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.' I need not quote to you the frequent repetitions of the same injunction which the Apostle Paul gives us, 'Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, Rejoice'; 'Rejoice evermore,' and the like. The fact that this joy is enjoined us suggests to us a thought or two, worth looking at.

You may say with truth, 'My emotions of joy and sorrow are not under my own control: I cannot help being glad and sad as circumstances dictate.' But yet here it lies, a commandment. It is a duty, a thing that the Apostle enjoins; in which, of course, is implied, that somehow or other it is to a large extent within one's own power, and that even the indulgence in this emotion, and the degree to which a Christian life shall be a cheerful life, is dependent in a large measure on our own volitions, and stands on the same footing as our obedience to God's other commandments.

We can to a very great extent control even our own emotions; but then, besides, we can do more than that. It may be quite true, that you cannot help feeling sorrowful in the presence of sorrowful thoughts, and glad in the presence of thoughts that naturally kindle gladness. But I will tell you what you can do or refrain from doing—you can either go and stand in the light, or you can go and stand in the shadow. You can either fix your attention upon, and make the predominant subject of your religious contemplations, a

truth which shall make you glad and strong, or a half-truth, which shall make you sorrowful, and therefore weak. Your meditations may either centre mainly upon your own selves, your faults and failings, and the like; or they may centre mainly upon God and His love, Christ and His grace, the Holy Spirit and His communion. You may either fill your soul with joyful thoughts, or though a true Christian, a real, devout, God-accepted believer, you may be so misapprehending the nature of the Gospel, and your relation to it, its promises and precepts, its duties and predictions, as that the prevalent tinge and cast of your religion shall be solemn and almost gloomy, and not lighted up and irradiated with the felt sense of God's presence—with the strong, healthy consciousness that you are a forgiven and justified man, and that you are going to be a glorified one.

And thus far (and it is a long way) by the selection or the rejection of the appropriate and proper subjects which shall make the main portion of our religious contemplation, and shall be the food of our devout thoughts, we *can* determine the complexion of our religious life. Just as you inject colouring matter into the fibres of some anatomical preparation; so a Christian may, as it were, inject into all the veins of his religious character and life, either the bright tints of gladness or the dark ones of self-despondency; and the result will be according to the thing that he has put into them. If your thoughts are chiefly occupied with God, and what He has done and is for you, then you will have peaceful joy. If, on the other hand, they are bent ever on yourself and your own unbelief, then you will always be sad. You can make your choice.

Christian men, the joy of the Lord is a duty. It is so because, as we have seen, it is the natural effect of faith, because we can do much to regulate our emotions directly, and much more to determine them by determining what set of thoughts shall engage us. A wise and strong faith is our duty. To keep our emotional nature well under control of reason and will is our duty. To lose thoughts of ourselves in God's truth about Himself is our duty. If we do these things, we cannot fail to have Christ's joy remaining in us, and making ours full. If we have not that blessed possession abiding with us, which He lived and died to give us, there is something wrong in us somewhere.

It seems to me that this is a truth which we have great need, my friends, to lay to heart. It is of no great consequence that we should practically confute the impotent old sneer about religion as being a gloomy thing. One does not need to mind much what some people say on that matter. The world would call 'the joy of the Lord' gloom, just as much as it calls 'godly sorrow' gloom. But we are losing for ourselves a power and an energy of which we have no conception, unless we feel that joy is a duty, and unless we believe that not to be joyful in the Lord is, therefore, more than a misfortune, it is a fault.

I do not forget that the comparative absence of this happy, peaceful sense of acceptance, harmony, oneness with God, springs sometimes from temperament, and depends on our natural disposition. Of course the natural character determines to a large extent the perspective of our conceptions of Christian truth, and the colouring of our inner religious life. I do not mean to say, for a moment, that there is one uniform type to which all must be conformed, or they sin. There

is indeed one type, the perfect manhood of Jesus, but it is all comprehensive, and each variety of our fragmentary manhood finds its own perfecting, and not its transmutation to another fashion of man, in being conformed to Him. Some of us are naturally faint-hearted, timid, sceptical of any success, grave, melancholy, or hard to stir to any emotion. To such there will be an added difficulty in making quiet confident joy any very familiar guest in their home or in their place of prayer. But even such should remember that the 'powers of the world to come,' the energies of the Gospel, are given to us for the very express purpose of overcoming, as well as of hallowing, natural dispositions. If it be our duty to rejoice in the Lord, it is no sufficient excuse to urge for not responding to the reiterated call, 'I myself am disposed to sadness.'

Whilst making all allowances for the diversities of character, which will always operate to diversify the cast of the inner life in each individual, we think that, in the great majority of instances, there are two things, both faults, which have a great deal more to do with the absence of joy from much Christian experience, than any unfortunate natural tendency to the dark side of things. The one is, an actual deficiency in the depth and reality of our faith; and the other is, a misapprehension of the position which we have a right to take and are bound to take.

There is an actual deficiency in our faith. Oh, brethren! it is not to be wondered at that Christians do not find that the Lord with them is the Lord their strength and joy, as well as the Lord 'their righteousness'; when the amount of their fellowship with Him is so small, and the depth of it so shallow, as we usually find it. The first true vision that a sinful soul has of

God, the imperfect beginnings of religion, usually are accompanied with intense self-aborrence, and sorrowing tears of penitence. A further closer vision of the love of God in Jesus Christ brings with it 'joy and peace in believing.' But the prolongation of these throughout life requires the steadfast continuousness of gaze towards Him. It is only where there is much faith and consequent love that there is much joy. Let us search our own hearts. If there is but little heat around the bulb of the thermometer, no wonder that the mercury marks a low degree. If there is but small faith, there will not be much gladness. The road into Giant Despair's castle is through doubt, which doubt comes from an absence, a sinful absence, in our own experience, of the felt presence of God, and the felt force of the verities of His Gospel.

But then, besides that, there is another fault: not a fault in the sense of crime or sin, but a fault (and a great one) in the sense of error and misapprehension. We as Christians do not take the position which we have a right to take and that we are bound to take. Men venture themselves upon God's word as they do on doubtful ice, timidly putting a light foot out, to feel if it will bear them, and always having the tacit fear, 'Now, it is going to crack!' You must cast yourselves on God's Gospel with all your weight, without any hanging back, without any doubt, without even the shadow of a suspicion that it will *give*—that the firm, pure floor will give, and let you through into the water! A Christian shrink from saying what the Apostle said, 'I *know* in whom I have believed, and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed to Him until that day'! A Christian fancy that salvation is a future thing, and forget that

it is a present thing! A Christian tremble to profess 'assurance of hope,' forgetting that there is no hope strong enough to bear the stress of a life's sorrows, which is not a conviction certain as one's own existence! Brethren! understand that the Gospel is a Gospel which brings a present salvation; and try to feel that it is not presumption, but simply acting out the very fundamental principle of it, when you are not afraid to say, 'I *know* that my Redeemer is yonder, and I *know* that He loves me!' Try to feel, I say, that by faith you have a right to take that position, 'Now, we *know* that we are the sons of God'; that you have a right to claim for yourselves, and that you are falling beneath the loftiness of the gift that is given to you unless you do claim for yourselves, the place of sons, accepted, loved, sure to be glorified at God's right hand. Am I teaching presumption? am I teaching carelessness, or a dispensing with self-examination? No, but I am saying this: If a man have once felt, and feel, in however small and feeble a degree, and depressed by whatsoever sense of daily transgressions, if he feel, faint like the first movement of an imprisoned bird in its egg, the feeble pulse of an almost imperceptible and fluttering faith beat—then that man has a right to say, 'God is mine!'

As one of our great teachers, little remembered now said, 'Let me take my personal salvation for granted'—and what? and 'be idle?' No; 'and *work* from it.' Ay, brethren! a Christian is not to be for ever asking himself, 'Am I a Christian?' He is not to be for ever looking into himself for marks and signs that he is. He is to look into himself to discover sins, that he may by God's help cast them out, to discover sins that shall teach him to say with greater thankfulness,

'What a redemption this is which I possess!' but he is to base his convictions that he is God's child upon something other than his own characteristics and the feebleness of his own strength. He is to have 'joy in the Lord' whatever may be his sorrow from outward things. And I believe that if Christian people would lay that thought to heart, they would understand better how the natural operation of the Gospel is to make them glad, and how rejoicing in the Lord is a Christian duty.

III. And now with regard to the other thought that still remains to be considered, namely, that rejoicing in the Lord is a source of strength,—I have already anticipated, fragmentarily, nearly all that I could have said here in a more systematic form. All gladness has something to do with our efficiency; for it is the prerogative of man that his force comes from his mind, and not from his body. That old song about a sad heart tiring in a mile, is as true in regard to the Gospel, and the works of Christian people, as in any other case. If we have hearts full of light, and souls at rest in Christ, and the wealth and blessedness of a tranquil gladness lying there, and filling our being; work will be easy, endurance will be easy, sorrow will be bearable, trials will not be so very hard, and above all temptations we shall be lifted, and set upon a rock. If the soul is full, and full of joy, what side of it will be exposed to the assault of *any* temptation? If the appeal be to fear, the gladness that is there is an answer. If the appeal be to passion, desire, wish for pleasure of any sort, there is no need for any more—the heart is *full*. And so the gladness which rests in Christ will be a gladness which will fit us for all service and for all endurance, which will be

unbroken by any sorrow, and, like the magic shield of the old legends, invisible, impenetrable, in its crystal-line purity will stand before the tempted heart, and will repel all the 'fiery darts of the wicked.'

'The joy of the Lord is your strength,' my brother! Nothing else is. No vehement resolutions, no sense of his own sinfulness, nor even contrite remembrance of past failures, ever yet made a man strong. It made him weak that he might become strong, and when it had done that it had done its work. For strength there must be hope, for strength there must be joy. If the arm is to smite with vigour, it must smite at the bidding of a calm and light heart. Christian work is of such a sort as that the most dangerous opponent to it is simple despondency and simple sorrow. 'The joy of the Lord is your strength.'

Well, then! there are two questions: How comes it that so much of the world's joy is weakness? and how comes it that so much of the world's notion of religion is gloom and sadness? Answer them for yourselves, and remember: you are weak unless you are glad; you are not glad and strong unless your faith and hope are fixed in Christ, and unless you are working from and not towards the sense of pardon, from and not towards the conviction of acceptance with God!

SABBATH OBSERVANCE

'In those days saw I in Judah some treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and lading asses; as also wine, grapes, and figs, and all manner of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the sabbath day: and I testified against them in the day wherein they sold victuals. 16. There dwelt men of Tyre also therein, which brought fish, and all manner of ware, and sold on the sabbath unto the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem. 17. Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said unto them, What evil thing is this that ye do, and profane the sabbath day? 18. Did not your fathers thus, and did not our God bring all this evil upon us, and upon this city? yet ye bring more wrath upon Israel by

profaning the sabbath. 18. And it came to pass, that when the gates of Jerusalem began to be dark before the sabbath, I commanded that the gates should be shut, and charged that they should not be opened till after the sabbath: and some of my servants set I at the gates, that there should no burden be brought in on the sabbath day. 20. So the merchants and sellers of all kind of ware lodged without Jerusalem once or twice. 21. Then I testified against them, and said unto them, Why lodge ye about the wall? if ye do so again, I will lay hands on you. From that time forth came they no more on the sabbath. 22. And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should come and keep the gates, to sanctify the sabbath day. Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me according to the greatness of Thy mercy.—NEH. xiii. 15-22.

MANY religious and moral reformations depend for their vitality on one man, and droop if his influence be withdrawn. It was so with Nehemiah's work. He toiled for twelve years in Jerusalem, and then returned for 'certain days' to the king at Babylon. The length of his absence is not given; but it was long enough to let much of his work be undone, and to give him much trouble to restore it to the condition in which he had left it. This last chapter of his book is but a sad close for a record which began with such high hope, and tells of such strenuous, self-sacrificing effort. The last page of many a reformer's history has been, like Nehemiah's, a sad account of efforts to stem the ebbing tide of enthusiasm and the flowing tide of worldliness. The heavy stone is rolled a little way up hill, and, as soon as one strong hand is withdrawn, down it tumbles again to its old place. The evanescence of great men's work makes much of the tragedy of history.

Our passage is particularly concerned with Nehemiah's efforts to enforce Sabbath observance. The rest of the chapter is occupied with similar efforts to set right other irregularities of a ceremonial character, such as the exclusion of Gentiles from the Temple, the exaction of the 'portions of the Levites,' and the like. The passage falls into three parts—the abuse (vs. 15, 16), the vigorous remedies (vs. 17-22), and the prayer (v. 22).

I. The abuse consisted in Sabbath work and trading. Nehemiah found, on his return, that the people 'in Judæa'—that is, in the country districts—carried on their farm labour and also brought their produce to market to Jerusalem on the Sabbath. So he 'testified against them in the day wherein they sold victuals'; that is, probably meaning that he warned them either in person or by messengers before taking further steps. Not only did Jews break the sacred day, but they let heathen do so too. The narrative tells, with a kind of horror, the many aggravations of this piece of wickedness. 'They'—Gentiles with whom contact defiled—'sold on the Sabbath'—the day of rest—'to the children of Judah'—God's people—'in Jerusalem'—the Holy City. It was a many-barrelled crime. Tyre was far from Jerusalem, and one does not see how fish could have been brought in good condition. Perhaps their perishableness was the excuse for allowing their sale on the Sabbath, as is sometimes the case in fishing-villages even in Sabbath-keeping Scotland. Such was the abuse with which Nehemiah struggled.

It is easy to pooh-pooh his crusade against Sabbath labour as mere scrupulousness about externals. But it is a blunder and an injustice to a noble character if we forget that the stage of revelation at which he stood necessarily made him more dependent on externals than Christians are or should be. But his vindication does not need such considerations. He had a truer insight into what active men needed for vigorous working days, and what devout men needed for healthy religion, than many moderns who smile at his eagerness about 'mere externalisms.'

It is easy to ridicule the Jewish Sabbath and 'the Puritan Sunday.' No doubt there have been and are

well-meant but mistaken efforts to insist on too rigid observance. No doubt it has been often forgotten by good people that the Christian Lord's Day is not the Jewish Sabbath. Of course the religious observance of the day is not a fit subject for legislation. But the need for a seventh day of rest is impressed on our physical and intellectual nature; and devout hearts will joyfully find their best rest in Christian worship and service. The vigour of religious life demands special seasons set apart for worship. Unless there be such reservoirs along the road, there will be but a thin trickle of a brook by the way. It is all very well to talk about religion diffused through the life, but it will not be so diffused unless it is concentrated at certain times.

They are no benefactors to the community who seek to break down and relax the stringency of the prohibition of labour. If once the idea that Sunday is a day of amusement take root, the amusement of some will require the hard work of others, and the custom of work will tend to extend, till rest becomes the exception, and work the rule. There never was a time when men lived so furiously fast as now. The pace of modern life demands Sunday rest more than ever. If a railway car is run continually it will wear out sooner than if it were laid aside for a day or two occasionally; and if it is run at express speed it will need the rest more. We are all going at top speed; and there would be more breakdowns if it were not for that blessed institution which some people think they are promoting the public good by destroying—a seventh day of rest.

Our great trading centres in England have the same foreign element to complicate matters as

Nehemiah had to deal with. The Tyrian fishmongers knew and cared nothing for Israel's Jehovah or Sabbath, and their presence would increase the tendency to disregard the day. So with us, foreigners of many nationalities, but alike in their disregard of our religious observances, leaven the society, and help to mould the opinions and practices, of our great cities. That is a very real source of danger in regard to Sabbath observance and many other things; and Christian people should be on their guard against it.

II. The vigorous remedies applied by Nehemiah were administered first to the rulers. He sent for the nobles, and laid the blame at their doors. 'Ye profane the day,' said he. Men in authority are responsible for crimes which they could check, but prefer to wink at. Nehemiah seems to trace all the national calamities to the breach of the Sabbath; but of course he is simply laying stress on the sin about which he is speaking, as any man who sets himself earnestly to work to fight any form of evil is apt to do. Then the men who are not in earnest cry out about 'exaggeration.' Many other sins besides Sabbath-breaking had a share in sending Israel into captivity; and if Nehemiah had been fighting with idolatrous tendencies he would have isolated idolatry as the cause of its calamities, just as, when fighting against Sabbath-breaking, he emphasises that sin.

Nehemiah was governor for the Persian king, and so had a right to rate these nobles. In this day the people have the same right, and there are many social sins for which they should arraign civic and other authorities. Christian principles unflinchingly insisted on by Christian people, and brought to bear, by ballot-

boxes and other persuasive ways, on what stands for conscience in some high places, would make a wonderful difference on many of the abominations of our cities. Go to the 'nobles' first, and lay the burden on the backs that ought to carry it.

Then Nehemiah took practical measures by shutting the city gates on the eve of the Sabbath, and putting some of his own servants as a watch. The thing seems to have been done without any notice; so when the country folk came in, as usual, on the Sabbath, they could not get into the city, and camped outside, making a visible temptation to the citizens, to slip out and do a little business, if they could manage to elude the guards. Once or twice this happened; and then Nehemiah himself seems to have taken them in hand, with a very plain and sufficiently emphatic warning: 'If ye do so again, I will lay hands on you.'

Of course, 'from that time they came no more on the Sabbath,' as was natural after such a volley. A man with a good strong will is apt to get his own way, even when he is not clothed with the authority of a governor. Then Nehemiah strengthened the guard, or perhaps withdrew his own servants and substituted for them Levites, whose official position would put them in full sympathy with his efforts. That priestly guard would be inflexible, and with its appointment the abuse appears to have been crushed.

The example of Nehemiah's enforcing Sabbath observance is not to be taken as a pattern for Christian communities, without many limitations. But it appears to the present writer that it is perfectly legitimate for the civil power to insist upon, and if necessary to enforce, the observance of Sunday as a day of rest; and that, since legitimate, it is for the well-being of the

community that it should do so. Tyrians might believe anything they chose, and use the day of rest as they thought proper, so long as they did not sell fish on it. We do not interfere with religious convictions when we enjoin Sunday observance. Nehemiah's argument has sometimes to be used, even about such a matter: 'If ye do so again, I will lay hands on you.'

The methods adopted may yield suggestions for all who would aim at reforming abuses or public immoralities. One most necessary step is to cut off, as far as possible, opportunities for the sin. There will be no trade if you shut the gates the night before. There will be little drunkenness if there are no liquor shops. It is quite true that people cannot be made virtuous by legislation, but it is also true that they may be saved from temptations to become vicious by it.

Another hint comes from Nehemiah's vigorous word to the country folk outside the wall. There is need for very strong determination and much sanctified obstinacy in fighting popular abuses. They die hard. It is permissible to invoke the aid of the lawful authority. But a man with strong convictions and earnest purpose will be able to impress his convictions on a mass, even if he have no guards at his back. The one thing needful for Christian reformers is, not the power to appeal to force, but the force which they can carry within them. And it is better when the traders love the Sabbath too well to wish to drive bargains on it, than when they are hindered from doing as they wish by Nehemiah's strong will or formidable threats.

Once more, the guard of Levites may suggest that the execution of measures for the reformation of manners or morals is best entrusted to those who are in sympathy with them. Levites made faithful watch-

men. Many a promising measure for reformation has come to nothing because committed to the hands of functionaries who did not care for its success. The instruments are almost as important as the measures which they carry out.

III. Nehemiah's prayer occurs thrice in this chapter, at the close of each section recounting his reforming acts. In the first instance (v. 14) it is most full, and puts very plainly the merit of good deeds as a plea with God. The same thing is implied in its form in verse 22. But while, no doubt, the tone of the prayer is startling to us, and is not such as should be offered now by Christians, it but echoes the principle of retribution which underlies the law. 'This do, and thou shalt live,' was the very foundation of Nehemiah's form of God's revelation. We do not plead our own merits, because we are not under the law, but under grace, and the principle underlying the gospel is life by impartation of unmerited mercy and divine life. But the law of retribution still remains valid for Christians in so far as that God will never forget any of their works, and will give them full recompense for their work of faith and labour of love. Eternal life here and hereafter is wholly the gift of God; but that fact does not exclude the notion of 'the recompense of reward' from the Christian conception of the future. It becomes not us to present our good deeds before the Judge, since they are stained and imperfect, and the goodness in them is His gift. But it becomes Him to crown them with His gracious approbation, and to proportion the cities ruled in that future world to the talents faithfully used here. We need not be afraid of obscuring the truth that we are saved 'not of works, lest any man should boast,' though we insist

that a Christian man is rewarded according to his works.

Nehemiah had no false notion of his own goodness: for, while he asked for recompense for these good deeds of his, he could not but add, 'Spare me according to the greatness of Thy mercy.' He who asks to be 'spared' must know himself in peril of destruction; and he who invokes 'mercy' must think that, if he were dealt with according to justice, he would be in evil case. So the consciousness of weakness and sin is an integral part of this prayer, and that takes all the apparent self-righteousness out of the previous petition. However worthy of and sure of reward a Christian man's acts of love and efforts for the spread of God's honour may be, the doer of them must still be 'looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.'

*EXPOSITIONS OF
HOLY SCRIPTURE*

ALEXANDER MACLAREN, D. D., Litt. D.

ESTHER, JOB, PROVERBS
AND ECCLESIASTES

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THE BOOK OF ESTHER

THE NET SPREAD

'After these things did king Ahasuerus promote Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him, and set his seat above all the princes that were with him. 2. And all the king's servants, that were in the king's gate, bowed, and revered Haman: for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence. 3. Then the king's servants which were in the king's gate, said unto Mordecai, Why transgressest thou the king's commandment? 4. Now it came to pass, when they spake daily unto him, and he hearkened not unto them, that they told Haman, to see whether Mordecai's matters would stand: for he had told them that he was a Jew. 5. And when Haman saw that Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence, then was Haman full of wrath. 6. And he thought scorn to lay hands on Mordecai alone; for they had showed him the people of Mordecai: wherefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews that were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus, even the people of Mordecai. 7. In the first month, that is, the month Nisan, in the twelfth year of king Ahasuerus, they cast Pur, that is, the lot, before Haman from day to day, and from month to month, to the twelfth month, that is, the month Adar. 8. And Haman said unto king Ahasuerus, There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from all people; neither keep they the king's laws: therefore it is not for the king's profit to suffer them. 9. If it please the king, let it be written that they may be destroyed: and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver to the hands of those that have the charge of the business, to bring it into the king's treasuries. 10. And the king took his ring from his hand, and gave it unto Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the Jews' enemy. 11. And the king said unto Haman, The silver is given to thee, the people also, to do with them as it seemeth good to thee.'—ESTHER iii. 1-11.

THE stage of this passage is filled by three strongly marked and strongly contrasted figures: Mordecai, Haman, and Ahasuerus; a sturdy nonconformist, an arrogant and vindictive minister of state, and a despotic and careless king. These three are the visible persons, but behind them is an unseen and unnamed Presence, the God of Israel, who still protects His exiled people.

We note, first, the sturdy nonconformist. 'The reverence' which the king had commanded his servants to show to Haman was not simply a sign of respect, but an act of worship. Eastern adulation regarded a

monarch as in some sense a god, and we know that divine honours were in later times paid to Roman emperors, and many Christians martyred for refusing to render them. The command indicates that Ahasuerus desired Haman to be regarded as his representative, and possessing at least some reflection of godhead from him. European ambassadors to Eastern courts have often refused to prostrate themselves before the monarch on the ground of its being degradation to their dignity; but Mordecai stood erect while the crowd of servants lay flat on their faces, as the great man passed through the gate, because he would have no share in an act of worship to any but Jehovah. He might have compromised with conscience, and found some plausible excuses if he had wished. He could have put his own private interpretation on the prostration, and said to himself, 'I have nothing to do with the meaning that others attach to bowing before Haman. I mean by it only due honour to the second man in the kingdom.' But the monotheism of his race was too deeply ingrained in him, and so he kept 'a stiff backbone' and 'bowed not down.'

That his refusal was based on religious scruples is the natural inference from his having told his fellow-porters that he was a Jew. That fact would explain his attitude, but would also isolate him still more. His obstinacy piqued them, and they reported his contumacy to the great man, thus at once gratifying personal dislike, racial hatred, and religious antagonism, and recommending themselves to Haman as solicitous for his dignity. We too are sometimes placed in circumstances where we are tempted to take part in what may be called constructive idolatry. There arise, in our necessary co-operation with those who do not

share in our faith, occasions when we are expected to unite in acts which we are thought very straitlaced for refusing to do, but which, conscience tells us, cannot be done without practical disloyalty to Jesus Christ. Whenever that inner voice says 'Don't,' we must disregard the persistent solicitations of others, and be ready to be singular, and run any risk rather than comply. 'So did not I, because of the fear of God,' has to be our motto, whatever fellow-servants may say. The gate of Ahasuerus's palace was not a favourable soil for the growth of a devout soul, but flowers can bloom on dunghills, and there have been 'saints' in 'Cæsar's household.'

Haman is a sharp contrast to Mordecai. He is the type of the unworthy characters that climb or crawl to power in a despotic monarchy, vindictive, arrogant, cunning, totally oblivious of the good of the subjects, using his position for his own advantage, and ferociously cruel. He had naturally not noticed the one erect figure among the crowd of abject ones, but the insignificant Jew became important when pointed out. If he had bowed, he would have been one more nobody, but his not bowing made him somebody who had to be crushed. The childish burst of passion is very characteristic, and not less true to life is the extension of the anger and thirst for vengeance to 'all the Jews that were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus.' They were 'the people of Mordecai,' and that was enough. 'He thought scorn to lay hands on Mordecai alone.' What a perverted notion of personal dignity which thought the sacrifice of the one offender beneath it, and could only be satisfied by a blood-bath into which a nation should be plunged! Such an extreme of frantic lust for murder is only possible in such a

state as Ahasuerus's Persia, but the prostitution of public position to personal ends, and the adoption of political measures at the bidding of wounded vanity, and to gratify blind hatred of a race, is possible still, and it becomes all Christian men to use their influence that the public acts of their nation shall be clear of that taint.

Haman was as superstitious as cruel, and so he sought for auguries from heaven for his hellish purpose, and cast the lot to find the favourable day for bringing it about. He is not the only one who has sought divine approval for wicked public acts. Religion has been used to varnish many a crime, and *Te Deums* sung for many a victory which was little better than Haman's plot.

The crafty denunciation of the Jews to the king is a good specimen of the way in which a despot is hoodwinked by his favourites, and made their tool. It was no doubt, true that the Jews' laws were 'diverse from those of every people,' but it was not true that they did not 'keep the king's laws,' except in so far as these required worship of other gods. In all their long dispersion they have been remarkable for two things,—their tenacious adherence to the Law, so far as possible in exile, and their obedience to the law of the country of their sojourn. No doubt, the exiles in Persian territory presented the same characteristics. But Haman has had many followers in resenting the distinctiveness of the Jew, and charging on them crimes of which they were innocent. From Mordecai onwards it has been so, and Europe is to-day disgraced by a crusade against them less excusable than Haman's. Hatred still masks itself under the disguise of political expediency, and says, 'It is not for the king's profit to suffer them.'

But the true half of the charge was a eulogium, for it implied that the scattered exiles were faithful to God's laws, and were marked off by their lives. That ought to be true of professing Christians. They should obviously be living by other principles than the world adopts. The enemy's charge 'shall turn unto you for a testimony.' Happy shall we be if observers are prompted to say of us that 'our laws are diverse' from those of ungodly men around us!

The great bribe which Haman offered to the king is variously estimated as equal to from three to four millions sterling. He, no doubt, reckoned on making more than that out of the confiscation of Jewish property. That such an offer should have been made by the chief minister to the king, and that for such a purpose, reveals a depth of corruption which would be incredible if similar horrors were not recorded of other Eastern despots. But with Turkey still astonishing the world, no one can call Haman's offer too atrocious to be true.

Ahasuerus is the vain-glorious king known to us as Xerxes. His conduct in the affair corresponds well enough with his known character. The lives of thousands of law-abiding subjects are tossed to the favourite without inquiry or hesitation. He does not even ask the name of the 'certain people,' much less require proof of the charge against them. The insanity of weakening his empire by killing so many of its inhabitants does not strike him, nor does he ever seem to think that he has duties to those under his rule. Careless of the sanctity of human life, too indolent to take trouble to see things with his own eyes, apparently without the rudiments of the idea of justice, he wallowed in a sty of self-indulgence, and, while greedy of adulation

and the semblance of power, let the reality slip from his hands into those of the favourite, who played on his vices as on an instrument, and pulled the strings that moved the puppet. We do not produce kings of that sort nowadays, but King Demos has his own vices, and is as easily blinded and swayed as Ahasuerus. In every form of government, monarchy or republic, there will be would-be leaders, who seek to gain influence and carry their objects by tickling vanity, operating on vices, calumniating innocent men, and the other arts of the demagogue. Where the power is in the hands of the people, the people is very apt to take its responsibilities as lightly as Ahasuerus did his, and to let itself be led blindfold by men with personal ends to serve, and hiding them under the veil of eager desire for the public good. Christians should 'play the citizen as it becomes the gospel of Christ,' and take care that they are not beguiled into national enmities and public injustice by the specious talk of modern Hamans.

ESTHER'S VENTURE

'Again Esther spake unto Hatach, and gave him commandment unto Mordecai : 11. All the king's servants, and the people of the king's provinces, do know, that whosoever, whether man or woman, shall come unto the king into the inner court, who is not called, there is one law of his to put him to death, except such to whom the king shall hold out the golden sceptre, that he may live : but I have not been called to come in unto the king these thirty days. 12. And they told to Mordecai Esther's words. 13. Then Mordecai commanded to answer Esther, Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king's house, more than all the Jews. 14. For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place ; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed : and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this ? 15. Then Esther bade them return Mordecai this answer, 16. Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day : I also and my maidens will fast likewise ; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law : and if I perish, I perish. 17. So Mordecai went his way, and did according to all that Esther had commanded him.

'Now it came to pass on the third day, that Esther put on her royal apparel, and stood in the inner court of the king's house, over against the king's house : and the king sat upon his royal throne in the royal house, over against the gate of the

house. 2. And it was so, when the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, that she obtained favour in his sight: and the king held out to Esther the golden sceptre that was in his hand. So Esther drew near, and touched the top of the sceptre. 3. Then said the king unto her, What wilt thou, queen Esther? and what is thy request? it shall be even given thee to the half of the kingdom.'—ESTHER iv. 10-17; v. 1-3.

PATRIOTISM is more evident than religion in the Book of Esther. To turn to it after the fervours of prophets and the continual recognition of God in history which marks the other historical books, is like coming down from heaven to earth, as Ewald says. But that difference in tone probably accurately represents the difference between the saints and heroes of an earlier age and the Jews in Persia, in whom national feeling was stronger than devotion. The picture of their characteristics deducible from this Book shows many of the traits which have marked them ever since,—accommodating flexibility, strangely united with unbending tenacity; a capacity for securing the favour of influential people, and willingness to stretch conscience in securing it; reticence and diplomacy; and, beneath all, unquenchable devotion to Israel, which burns alike in the politic Mordecai and the lovely Esther.

There is not much audible religion in either, but in this lesson Mordecai impressively enforces his assurance that Israel cannot perish, and his belief in Providence setting people in their places for great unselfish ends; and Esther is ready to die, if need be, in trying to save her people, and thinks that fasting and prayer will help her in her daring attempt. These two cousins, unlike in so much, were alike in their devotion to Israel; and though they said little about their religion, they acted it, which is better.

It is very like Jews that the relationship between Mordecai and Esther should have been kept dark. Nobody but one or two trusted servants knew that the

porter was the queen's cousin, and probably her Jewish birth was also unknown. Secrecy is, no doubt, the armour of oppressed nations; but it is peculiarly agreeable to the descendants of Jacob, who was a master of the art. There must have been wonderful self-command on both sides to keep such a secret, and true affection, to preserve intercourse through apparent indifference.

Our passage begins in the middle of Esther's conversation with the confidential go-between, who told her of the insane decree for the destruction of the Jews, and of Mordecai's request that she should appeal to the king. She reminds him of what he knew well enough, the law that unsummoned intruders into the presence are liable to death; and adds what, of course, he did not know, that she had not been summoned for a month. We need not dwell on this ridiculously arrogant law, but may remark that the substantial accuracy of the statement is confirmed by classical and other authors, and may pause for a moment to note the glimpse given here of the delirium of self-importance in which these Persian kings lived, and to see in it no small cause of their vices and disasters. What chance of knowing facts or of living a wholesome life had a man shut off thus from all but lickspittles and slaves? No wonder that the victims of such dignity beat the sea with rods, when it was rude enough to wreck their ships! No wonder that they wallowed in sensuality, and lost pith and manhood! No wonder that Greece crushed their unwieldy armies and fleets!

And what a glimpse into their heart-emptiness and degradation of sacred ties is given in the fact that Esther the queen had not seen Ahasuerus for a month, though living in the same palace, and his favourite

wife! No doubt, the experiences of exile had something to do in later ages with the decided preference of the Jew for monogamy.

But, passing from this, we need only observe how clearly Esther sees and how calmly she tells Mordecai the tremendous risk which following his counsel would bring. Note that she does not refuse. She simply puts the case plainly, as if she invited further communication. 'This is how things stand. Do you still wish me to run the risk?' That is poor courage which has to shut its eyes in order to keep itself up to the mark. Unfortunately, the temperament which clearly sees dangers and that which dares them are not often found together in due proportion, and so men are over-rash and over-cautious. This young queen with her clear eyes saw, and with her brave heart was ready to face, peril to her life. Unless we fully realise difficulties and dangers beforehand, our enthusiasm for great causes will ooze out at our fingers' ends at the first rude assault of these. So let us count the cost before we take up arms, and let us take up arms after we have counted the cost. Cautious courage, courageous caution, are good guides. Either alone is a bad one.

Mordecai's grand message is a condensed statement of the great reasons which always exist for self-sacrificing efforts for others' good. His words are none the less saturated with devout thought because they do not name God. This porter at the palace gate had not the tongue of a psalmist or of a prophet. He was a plain man, not uninfluenced by his pagan surroundings, and perhaps he was careful to adapt his message to the lips of the Gentile messenger, and therefore did not more definitely use the sacred name.

It is very striking that Mordecai makes no attempt to minimise Esther's peril in doing as he wished. He knew that she would take her life in her hand, and he expects her to be willing to do it, as he would have been willing. It is grand when love exhorts loved ones to a course which may bring death to them, and lifelong loneliness and quenched hopes to it. Think of Mordecai's years of care over and pride in his fair young cousin, and how many joys and soaring visions would perish with her, and then estimate the heroic self-sacrifice he exercised in urging her to her course.

His first appeal is on the lowest ground. Pure selfishness should send her to the king; for, if she did not go, she would not escape the common ruin. So, on the one hand, she had to face certain destruction; and, on the other, there were possible success and escape. It may seem unlikely that the general massacre should include the favourite queen, and especially as her nationality was apparently a secret. But when a mob has once tasted blood, its appetite is great and its scent keen, and there are always informers at hand to point to hidden victims. The argument holds in reference to many forms of conflict with national and social evils. If Christian people allow vice and godlessness to riot unchecked, they will not escape the contagion, in some form or other. How many good men's sons have been swept away by the immoralities of great cities! How few families there are in which there is not 'one dead,' the victim of drink and dissipation! How the godliness of the Church is cooled down by the low temperature around! At the very lowest, self-preservation should enlist all good men in a sacred war against the sins which are slaying their countrymen. If smallpox breaks out in the slums, it will

come uptown into the grand houses, and the outcasts will prove that they are the rich man's brethren by infecting him, and perhaps killing him.

Mordecai goes back to the same argument in the later part of his answer, when he foretells the destruction of Esther and her father's house. There he puts it, however, in a rather different light. The destruction is not now, as before, her participation in the common tragedy, but her exceptional ruin while Israel is preserved. The unfaithful one, who could have intervened to save, and did not, will have a special infliction of punishment. That is true in many applications. Certainly, neglect to do what we can do for others does always bring some penalty on the slothful coward; and there is no more short-sighted policy than that which shirks plain duties of beneficence from regard to self.

But higher considerations than selfish ones are appealed to. Mordecai is sure that deliverance will come. He does not know whence, but come it will. How did he arrive at that serene confidence? Certainly because he trusted God's ancient promises, and believed in the indestructibility of the nation which a divine hand protected. How does such a confidence agree with fear of 'destruction'? The two parts of Mordecai's message sound contradictory; but he might well dread the threatened catastrophe, and yet be sure that through any disaster Israel as a nation would pass, cast down, no doubt, but not destroyed.

How did it agree with his earnestness in trying to secure Esther's help? If he was certain of the issue, why should he have troubled her or himself? Just for the same reason that the discernment of God's purposes and absolute reliance on these stimulate, and do not

paralyse, devout activity in helping to carry them out. If we are sure that a given course, however full of peril and inconvenience, is in the line of God's purposes, that is a reason for strenuous effort to carry it out. Since some men are to be honoured to be His instruments, shall not we be willing to offer ourselves? There is a holy and noble ambition which covets the dignity of being used by Him. They who believe that their work helps forward what is dear to God's heart may well do with their might what they find to do, and not be too careful to keep on the safe side in doing it. The honour is more than the danger. 'Here am I; take me,' should be the Christian feeling about all such work.

The last argument in this noble summary of motives for self-sacrifice for others' good is the thought of God's purpose in giving Esther her position. It carries large truth applicable to us all. The source of all endowments of position, possessions, or capacities, is God. His purpose in them all goes far beyond the happiness of the receiver. Dignities and gifts of every sort are ours for use in carrying out His great designs of good to our fellows. Esther was made queen, not that she might live in luxury and be the plaything of a king, but that she might serve Israel. Power is duty. Responsibility is measured by capacity. Obligation attends advantages. Gifts are burdens. All men are stewards, and God gives His servants their 'talents,' not for selfish squandering or hoarding, but to trade with, and to pay the profits to Him. This penetrating insight into the source and intention of all which we have, carries a solemn lesson for us all.

The fair young heroine's soul rose to the occasion, and responded with a swift determination to her older cousin's lofty words. Her pathetic request for the

prayers of the people for whose sake she was facing death was surely more than superstition. Little as she says about her faith in God, it obviously underlay her courage. A soul that dares death in obedience to His will and in dependence on His aid, demonstrates its godliness more forcibly in silence than by many professions.

'If I perish, I perish!' Think of the fair, soft lips set to utter that grand surrender, and of all the flowery and silken cords which bound the young heart to life, so bright and desirable as was assured to her. Note the resolute calmness, the Spartan brevity, the clear sight of the possible fatal issue, the absolute submission. No higher strain has ever come from human lips. This womanly soul was of the same stock as a Miriam, a Deborah, Jephthah's daughter; and the same fire burned in her,—utter devotion to Israel because entire consecration to Israel's God. Religion and patriotism were to her inseparable. What was her individual life compared with her people's weal and her God's will? She was ready without a murmur to lay her young radiant life down. Such ecstasy of willing self-sacrifice raises its subject above all fears and dissolves all hindrances. It may be wrought out in uneventful details of our small lives, and may illuminate these as truly as it sheds imperishable lustre over the lovely figure standing in the palace court, and waiting for life or death at the will of a sensual tyrant.

The scene there need not detain us. We can fancy Esther's beating heart putting fire in her cheek, and her subdued excitement making her beauty more splendid as she stood. What a contrast between her and the arrogant king on his throne! He was a

voluptuary, ruined morally by unchecked licence,—a monster, as he could hardly help being, of lust, self-will, and caprice. She was at that moment an incarnation of self-sacrifice and pure enthusiasm. The blind world thought that he was the greater; but how ludicrous his condescension, how vulgar his pomp, how coarse his kindness, how gross his prodigal promises by the side of the heroine of faith, whose life he held in his capricious hand!

How amazed the king would have been if he had been told that one of his chief titles to be remembered would be that moment's interview! Ahasuerus is the type of swollen self-indulgence, which always degrades and coarsens; Esther is the type of self-sacrifice which as uniformly refines, elevates, and arrays with new beauty and power. If we would reach the highest nobleness possible to us, we must stand with Esther at the gate, and not envy or imitate Ahasuerus on his gaudy throne. 'He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that loseth his life for **My sake and the gospel's**, the same shall find it.'

MORDECAI AND ESTHER

'For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?'—ESTHER iv. 14.

ALL Christians are agreed in holding the principles which underlie our missionary operations. They all believe that the world is a fallen world, that without Christ the fallen world is a lost world, that the preaching of the Gospel is the way to bring Christ to those

who need Him, that to the Church is committed the **ministry of reconciliation.**

These are the grand truths from which the **grand** missionary enterprise has sprung. It is not my intention to enlarge on them now. But in this and in all cases, there are secondary motives besides, and inferior to those which are derived from the real fundamental principles. We are stimulated to action not only because we hold certain great principles, but because they are reinforced by certain subordinate considerations.

It is the duty of all Christians to promote the missionary cause on the lofty grounds already referred to. Besides that, it may be in a special way our duty for some additional reasons drawn from peculiarities in our condition. Circumstances do not make duties, but they may bring a special weight of obligation on us to do them. Times again do not make duties, but they too make a thing a special duty now. The consideration of consequences may not decide us in matters of conscience, but it may allowably come in to deter us from what is on higher grounds a sin to be avoided, or a good deed to be done. Success or failure is an alternative that must not be thought of when we are asking ourselves, 'Ought I to do this?' but when we have answered that question, we may go to work with a lighter heart and a firmer hand if we are sure that we are not going to fail.

All these are inferior considerations which do not avail to determine duty and do not go deep enough to constitute the real foundation of our obligation. They are considerations which can scarcely be shut out, and should be taken in in determining the weight of our obligation, in shaping the selection of our duties, in

stimulating the zeal and sedulousness with which we do what we know to be right.

To a consideration of some of these secondary reasons for energy in the work of missions I ask your attention. The verse which I have selected for my text is spoken by Mordecai to Esther, when urging her to her perilous patriotism. It singularly blends the statesman and the believer. He sees that if she selfishly refuses to identify herself with her people, in their calamity, the wave that sweeps them away will not be stayed outside her royal dwelling; he knows too much of courts to think that she can stand against that burst of popular fury should it break out. But he looks on as a devout man believing God's promises, and seeing past all instruments; he warns her that 'deliverance and enlargement shall arise.' He is no fatalist; he believes in man's work, therefore he urges her to let herself be the instrument by which God's work shall be done. He is no atheist; he believes in God's sovereign power and unchangeable faithfulness, therefore he looks without dismay to the possibility of her failure. He knows that if she is idle, all the evil will come on her head, who has been unfaithful, and that in spite of that God's faithfulness shall not be made of none effect. He believes that she has been raised to her position for God's sake, for her brethren's sake, not her own.

'Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?' There speaks the devout statesman, the court-experienced believer. He has seen favourites tended and tossed aside, viziers powerful and beheaded, kings half deified and deserted in their utmost need. Sitting at the gate there, he has seen generations of Hamans go out and in; he has seen the craft, the cruelty, the lusts which have been the apparent

causes of the puppets' rise and fall, and he has looked beyond it all and believed in a Hand that pulled the wires, in a King of Kings who raiseth up one and setteth down another. So he believes that his Esther has come to the kingdom by God's appointment, to do God's work at God's time. And these convictions keep him calm and stir her.

We may find here a series of considerations having a special bearing on this missionary work. To them I ask your attention.

I. God gives us our position that we may use it for His cause, for the spread of the Gospel.

In most general terms.

(a) No man has anything for his own sake—no man liveth to himself. We come to the kingdom for others. Here we touch the foundation of all authority; we learn the awful burden of all talents, the dreadful weight of every gift.

(b) No man receives the Gospel for his own sake. We are not non-conductors, but stand all linked hand in hand. We are members of the body that the blood may flow freely through us. For no loftier reason did God light the candle than that it might give light. We are beacons kindled to transmit, till every sister height flashes back the ray.

(c) We especially have received a position in the world for the conversion of the world. Our national character and position unite that of the Jew in his two stages—we are set to be the 'light of the world,' and we are 'tribes of the wandering foot.' Our history, all, has tended to this function, our local position, our laws, our commerce. We are citizens of a nation which 'as a nest has found the riches' of the peoples. In every land our people dwell.

Think of our colonies. Think that we are brought into contact with heathen, whether we will or not. We cannot help influencing them. 'Through you the name of God is blasphemed amongst the Gentiles.' Think of our sailors. Why this position? What is plainer than that all this is in order that the Gospel might be spread? God has ever let the Gospel follow in the tracks made for it by commercial law.

This object does not exclude others. Our language, our literature, our other rich spiritual treasures, we hold them all that we may impart. But remember that all these other good things that England has will spread themselves with little effort, people will be glad to get them. But the Gospel will not be spread so. It must be taken to those who do not want it. It must be held forth with outstretched hands to 'a disobedient and gainsaying people.' It is found of them that seek it not.

Like the Lord we must go to the wanderers, we must find them as they lie panting and thirsty in the wild wilderness. Therefore Christian men must make special earnest efforts or the work will not be done. They must be as the 'dew that tarrieth not for man, nor waiteth for the sons of men.'

And again, such action does not involve approval of the means by which such a position has become ours. Mordecai knew what vile passions had been at work to put Esther there, and did not forget poor Vashti, and we have no need to hide conviction that England's place has often been won by wrong, been kept by violence and fraud, that, as she has strode to empire, her foot has trodden on many a venerable throne unjustly thrown down, and her skirts have been dabbled with 'the blood of poor innocents,' splashed there with

her armed hoof. Be it so!—Still! ‘Thou makest the wrath of man to praise Thee.’ Still—‘we are debtors both to the Greek and barbarian,’ and all the more debtors because of ills inflicted. God has laid on us a solemn responsibility. Over all the dust of base intrigues, and the smoke of bloody battles, and the hubbub of busy commerce, His hand has been working, and though we have been sinful, He has given us a place and a power, mighty and awful. We have received these not for our own glory, not that we should boast of our dominion, not that we should gather tribute of gain and glory from subject peoples, not even that we should carry to them the great though lesser blessings of language, united order, peaceful commerce, sway over brute nature, but that we should give them what will make them men—Christ.

We have a work to do, an awful work. To us all as Christians, to us especially as citizens of this land and members of this race, to us and to our brethren across the Atlantic the message comes, by our history, our manners, etc., as plainly as if it were written in every wave that beats around our coast. ‘Ye are my witnesses, saith the Lord.’

II. God lays upon us special missionary work by the special characteristics of the times.

‘Such a time as this!’ Was there ever such a time?

Look at the condition of heathenism. It is everywhere tottering. ‘The idols are on the beasts, Bel boweth down.’ The grim gods sit half famished already. There is a crack in every temple wall. Mahommedanism, Buddhism, Brahminism — they are none of them progressive. They are none of them vital. Think how only the Gospel outleaps space and time. How all these systems are of time and devoured

by it, as Saturn eats his own children. They are of the things that can be shaken, and their being shaken makes more certain the remaining of the things that cannot be shaken.

Look at the fields open. India, China, Japan, Africa, in a word, 'The field is the world' in a degree in which it never was before. 'Such a time'—a time of seething, and we can determine the cosmos; a plastic time, and we can mould it; it is a deluge, push the ark boldly out and ransom some.

III. If we neglect the voice of God's providence, harm comes on us.

The gifts unimproved are apt to be lost. One knows not all the conditions on which England holds her sway, nor do we fathom the strange way in which spiritual characteristics are inwrought with material interests. But we believe in a providential government of the world, and of this we may be very sure, that all advantages not used for God are held by a very precarious tenure.

The fact is that selfishness is the ruin of any people. When you have a 'Christian' nation not using their position for God's glory, they are using it for their own sakes; and that indicates a state of mind which will lead to numberless other evils in their relation to men, many of which have a direct tendency to rob them of their advantages. For instance, a selfish nation will never hold conquests with a firm grasp. If we do not bind subject peoples to us by benefits, we shall repel them by hatreds. Think of India and its lessons, or of South Africa and its. We have seen the tide of material prosperity ebb away from many a nation and land, and I for my part believe in the Hand of God in history, and believe that the tide follows the motions of the heavens.

The history of the Jewish people is not an exception to the laws of God's government of the world, but a specimen of it. They who were made a hearth in which the embers of divine truth were kept in a dark world, when they began to think that they had the truth in order that they might be different from other people, and forgot that they were different from others in order that they might first preserve and then impart the truth to all, lost the light and heat of it, stiffened into formal hypocrisy and malice and all uncharitableness, and then the Roman sword smote their national life in twain.

Whatever is not used for God becomes a snare first, then injures the possessors, and tends to destroy the possessors. The march of Providence goes on. Its purposes will be effected. Whatever stands in the way will be mowed remorselessly down, if need be. Helps that have become hindrances will go. The kingdoms of this world will have to fall; and if we are not helping and hastening the coming of the Lord we shall be destroyed by the brightness of His coming. The chariot rolls on. For men and for nations there is only the choice of yoking themselves to the car, and finding themselves borne along rather than bearing it, and partaking the triumph, or of being crushed beneath its awful wheels as they bound along their certain road, bearing Him who rides 'forth prosperously because of truth and meekness and righteousness.'

IV. Though we be unfaithful, God's purpose of mercy to the world shall be accomplished.

'Deliverance and enlargement shall arise from another place.' So it is certain that God from eternity has willed that all flesh should see His salvation. He loves the heathen better than we do. Christ has

died not for our sins only, but for the sins of the whole world. God hath made of one blood all nations of men. The race is one in its need. The race is one in its goal. The Gospel is fit for all men. The Gospel is preached to all men. The Gospel shall yet be received by a world, and from every corner of a believing earth will rise one roll of praise to one Father, and the race shall be one in its hopes, one in its Lord, one in faith, one in baptism, one in one God and Father of us all. That grand unity shall certainly come. That true unity and fraternity shall be realised. The blissful wave of the knowledge of the Lord shall cover and hide and flow rejoicingly over all national distinctions. 'In that day Israel shall be the third with Egypt and with Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth.'

This is as certain as the efficacy of a Saviour's blood can make it, as certain as the universal adaptation and design of a preached Gospel can make it, as certain as the oneness of human nature can make it, as certain as the power of a Comforter who shall convince the world of sin, of righteousness, and judgment can make it, as certain as the misery of man can make it, as certain as the promises of God who cannot lie can make it, as certain as His faithfulness who hangs the rainbow in the heavens and enters into an everlasting covenant with all the earth can make it.

And this accumulation of certainties does not depend on the faithfulness of men. In the width of that mighty result the failure of some single agent may be eliminated. Nay, more, though all men failed, God hath instruments, and will use them Himself, if need were.

Only we may share the triumph and partake of the blessed result. Decide for yourself, what share you will

have in that marvellous day. Let your work be such as that it shall abide. Stonehenge, cathedrals, temples stand when all else has passed away. Work for God abides and outlasts everything beside, and the smallest service for Him is only made to flash forth light by the glorifying and revealing fires of that awful day which will burn up the wood, the hay, and the stubble, and flow with beautifying brightness and be flashed back with double splendour from 'the gold, the silver, and the precious stones,' the abiding workmanship of devout hearts in that everlasting tabernacle which shall not be taken down, the ransomed souls builded together, ransomed by our preaching, and 'builded up together for a temple of God by the Spirit.'

THE NET BROKEN

'And Esther spake yet again before the king, and fell down at his feet, and besought him with tears to put away the mischief of Haman the Agagite, and his device that he had devised against the Jews. 4. Then the king held out the golden sceptre toward Esther. So Esther arose, and stood before the king, 5. And said, If it please the king, and if I have found favour in his sight, and the thing seem right before the king, and I be pleasing in his eyes, let it be written to reverse the letters devised by Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote to destroy the Jews which are in all the king's provinces: 6. For how can I endure to see the evil that shall come unto my people! or how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred? 7. Then the king Ahasuerus said unto Esther the queen, and to Mordecai the Jew, Behold, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and him they have hanged upon the gallows, because he laid his hand upon the Jews. 8. Write ye also for the Jews, as it liketh you, in the king's name, and seal it with the king's ring: for the writing which is written in the king's name, and sealed with the king's ring, may no man reverse. 15. And Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal apparel of blue and white, and with a great crown of gold, and with a garment of fine linen and purple: and the city of Shushan rejoiced and was glad. 16. The Jews had light, and gladness, and joy, and honour. 17. And in every province, and in every city, whithersoever the king's commandment and his decree came, the Jews had joy and gladness, a feast and a good day. And many of the people of the land became Jews; for the fear of the Jews fell upon them.'—ESTHER viii. 3-8, 15-17.

THE spirit of this passage may perhaps be best caught by taking the three persons appearing in it, and the One who does not appear, but acts unseen through them all.

I. The heroine of the whole book and of this chapter is Esther, one of the sweetest and noblest of the women of Scripture. The orphan girl who had grown up into beauty under the care of her uncle Mordecai, and was lifted suddenly from sheltered obscurity into the 'fierce light that beats upon a throne,' like some flower culled in a shady nook and set in a king's bosom, was true to her childhood's protector and to her people, and kept her sweet, brave gentleness unspoiled by the rapid elevation which ruins so many characters. Her Jewish name of Hadassah ('myrtle') well befits her, for she is clothed with unostentatious beauty, pure and fragrant as the blossoms that brides twine in their hair. But, withal, she has a true woman's courage which is always ready to endure any evil and dare any danger at the bidding of her heart. She took her life in her hand when she sought an audience of Ahasuerus uninvited, and she knew that she did. Nothing in literature is nobler than her quiet words, which measure her danger without shrinking, and front it without heroics: 'If I perish, I perish!'

The danger was not past, though she was queen and beloved; for a despot's love is a shifting sand-bank, which may yield anchorage to-day, and to-morrow may be washed away. So she counted not her life dear unto herself when, for the second time, as in our passage, she ventured, uninvited, into the king's presence. The womanly courage that risks life for love's sake is nobler than the soldier's that feels the lust of battle maddening him.

Esther's words to the king are full of tact. She begins with what seems to have been the form of address prescribed by custom, for it is used by her in her former requests (chap. v. 8; vii. 3). But she adds a

variation of the formula, tinged with more personal reference to the king's feeling towards her, as well as breathing entire submission to his estimate of what was fitting. 'If the thing seem right before the king,' appeals to the sense of justice that lay dormant beneath the monarch's arbitrary will; 'and I be pleasing in his eyes,' drew him by the charm of her beauty. She avoided making the king responsible for the plot, and laid it at the door of the dead and discredited Haman. It was his device, and since he had fallen, his policy could be reversed without hurting the king's dignity. And then with fine tact, as well as with a burst of genuine feeling, she flings all her personal influence into the scale, and seeks to move the king, not by appeals to his justice or royal duty, but to his love for her, which surely could not bear to see her suffer. One may say that it was a low motive to appeal to, to ask the despot to save a people in order to keep one woman from sorrow; and so it was. It was Ahasuerus's fault that such a reason had more weight with him than nobler ones. It was not Esther's that she used her power over him to carry her point. She used the weapons that she had, and that she knew would be efficacious. The purpose for which she used them is her justification.

Esther may well teach her sisters to-day to be brave and gentle, to use their influence over men for high purposes of public good, to be the inspirers of their husbands, lovers, brothers, for all noble thinking and doing; to make the cause of the oppressed their own, to be the apostles of mercy and the hinderers of wrong, to keep true to their early associations if prosperity comes to them, and to cherish sympathy with their nation so deep that they cannot 'endure to see the evil

that shall come unto them' without using all their womanly influence to avert it.

II. Ahasuerus plays a sorry part beside Esther. He knows no law but his own will, and that is moved, not by conscience or reason, but by ignoble passions and sensual desires. He tosses his subjects' lives as trivial gifts to any who ask for them. Haman's wife knew that he had only to 'speak to the king,' and Mordecai would be hanged; Haman had no difficulty in securing the royal mandate for the murder of all the Jews. Sated with the indulgence of low desires, he let all power slip from his idle hands, and his manhood was rotted away by wallowing in the pigsty of voluptuousness. But he was tenacious of the semblance of authority, and demanded the appearance of abject submission from the 'servants' who were his masters. He yielded to Esther's prayer as lightly as to Haman's plot. Whether the Jews were wiped out or not mattered nothing to him, so long as he had no trouble in the affair.

To shift all responsibility off his own shoulders on to somebody else's was his one aim. He was as untrue to his duty when he gave his signet to Mordecai, and bade him and Esther do as they liked, as when he had given it to Haman. And with all this slothful indifference to his duty, he was sensitive to etiquette, and its cobwebs held him whom the cords of his royal obligations could not hold. It mattered not to him that the edict which he allowed Mordecai to promulgate practically lit the flames of civil war. He had washed his hands of the whole business.

It is a hideous picture of an Eastern despot, and has been said to be unhistorical and unbelievable. But the world has seen many examples of rulers whom the

possession of unlimited and irresponsible power has corrupted in like fashion. And others than rulers may take the warning that to live to self is the mother of all sins and crimes; that no man can safely make his own will and his own passions his guides; that there is no slavery so abject as that of the man who is tyrannised by his lower nature; that there is a temptation besetting us all to take the advantages and neglect the duties of our position, and that to yield to it is sure to end in moral ruin. We are all kings, even if our kingdom be only our own selves, and we shall rule wisely only if we rule as God's viceroys, and think more of duty than of delight.

III. Mordecai is a kind of duplicate of Joseph, and embodies valuable lessons. Contented acceptance of obscurity and neglect of his services, faithfulness to his people and his God in the foul atmosphere of such a court, wise reticence, patient discharge of small duties, undoubting hope when things looked blackest fed by steadfast faith in God, unchangedness of character and purpose when lifted to supreme dignity, the use of influence and place, not for himself, but for his people,—all these are traits which may be imitated in any life. We should be the same men, whether we sit unnoticed among the lackeys at the gate, or are bearing the brunt of the hatred of powerful foes, or are clothed 'in royal apparel of blue and white, and with a great crown of gold.' These gauds were nothing to Mordecai, and earthly honours should never turn our heads. He valued power because it enabled him to save his brethren, and we should cultivate the same spirit. The political world, with its fierce struggles for personal ends, its often disregard of the public good, and its use of place and power for 'making a pile' or helping rela-

tions up, would be much the better for some infusion of the spirit of Mordecai.

IV. But we must not look only at the visible persons and forces. This book of Esther does not say much about God, but His presence broods over it all, and is the real spring that moves the movers that are seen. It is all a lesson of how God works out His purposes through men that seem to themselves to be working out theirs. The king's criminal abandonment to lust and luxury, Haman's meanly personal pique, Esther's beauty, the fall of the favourite, the long past services of Mordecai, even the king's sleepless night, are all threads in the web, and God is the weaver. The story raises the whole question of the standing miracle of the co-existence and co-operation of the divine and the human. Man is free and responsible, God is sovereign and all-pervading. He 'makes the wrath of man to praise Him, and with the remainder thereof He girdeth Himself.' To-day, as then, He is working out His deep designs through men whom He has raised up, though they have not known Him. Amid the clash of contending interests and worldly passions His solemn purpose steadily advances to its end, like the irresistible ocean current, which persists through all storms that agitate the surface, and draws them into the drift of its silent trend. Ahasuerus, Haman, Esther, Mordecai, are His instruments, and yet each of them is the doer of his or her deed, and has to answer to Him for it.

THE BOOK OF JOB

SORROW THAT WORSHIPS

'Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.'—
JOB I. 21.

THIS book of Job wrestles with the problem of the meaning of the mystery of sorrow. Whether history or a parable, its worth is the same, as tortured hearts have felt for countless centuries, and will feel to the end. Perhaps no picture that was ever painted is grander and more touching than that of the man of Uz, in the antique wealth and happiness of his brighter days, rich, joyful, with his children round him, living in men's honour, and walking upright before God. Then come the dramatic completeness and suddenness of his great trials. One day strips him of all, and stripped of all he rises to a loftier dignity, for there is a majesty as well as an isolation in his sorrow.

How many spirits tossed by afflictions have found peace in these words! How many quivering lips have tried to utter their grave, calm accents! To how many of us are they hallowed by memories of times when they stood between us and despair!

They seem to me to say everything that can be said about our trials and losses, to set forth the whole truth of the facts, and to present the whole series of feelings with which good men may and should be exercised.

I. The vindication of sorrow.

He 'rent his clothes'—the signs and tokens of inward desolation and loss.

It is worth our while to stay for one moment with the thought that we are meant to feel grief. God sends sorrows in order that they may pain. Sorrow has its manifold uses in our lives and on our hearts. It is natural. That is enough. God set the fountain of tears in our souls. We are bidden not to 'despise the chastening of the Lord.' It is they who are 'exercised' thereby to whom the chastisement is blessed.

It is sanctioned by Christ. He wept. He bade the women of Jerusalem weep for themselves and for their children.

Religion does not destroy the natural emotions—sorrow as little as any other. It guides, controls, curbs, comforts, and brings blessings out of it. So do not aim at an impossible stoicism, but permit nature to have its way, and look at the picture of this manly sorrow of Job's—calm, silent, unless when stung by the undeserved reproaches of these three 'orthodox liars for God,' and going to God and worshipping.

II. The recognition of loss and sorrow as the law of life.

'Naked came I out of my mother's womb.'

We need not dwell on the figure 'mother,' suggesting the grave as the kindly mother's bosom that gathers us all in, and the thought that perhaps gleams forth that death, too, is a kind of birth.

But the truth picturesquely set forth is just the old and simple one—that *all possessions are transient*.

The naked self gets clothed and lapped round with possessions, but they are all outside of it, apart from its individuality. It *has been* without them. It will

be without them. Death at the end will rob us of them all.

The inevitable law of loss is fixed and certain. We are losing something every moment—not only possessions, but all our dearest ties are knit but for a time, and sure to be snapped. They go, and then after a while we go.

The independence of each soul of all its possessions and relations is as certain as the loss of them. They may go and we are made naked, but still we exist all the same. We have to learn the hard lesson which sounds so unfeeling, that we can live on in spite of all losses. Nothing, no one, is necessary to us.

All this is very cold and miserable; it is the standing point of law and necessity. An atheist could say it. It is the beginning of the Christian contemplation of life, but only the beginning.

III. The recognition of God in the law.

‘The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away.’ That is a step far beyond the former. To bring in the thought of *the Lord* makes a world of difference.

The tendency is to look only at the second cause. In Job’s case there were two classes of agencies, men, Chaldeans and Sabeans, and natural causes, fire and wind, but he did not stop with these.

The grand corrective of that tendency lies in the full theistic idea, that God is the sole cause of all. The immanence of Deity in all things and events is our refuge from the soul-crushing tyranny of the reign of law.

That devout recognition of God in law is eminently to be made in regard to death, as Job does in the text: ‘The number of his months is with Thee. Death is not any more nor any less under His control

than all other human incidents are. It has no special sanctity, nor abnormally close connection with His will, but it no more is exempt from such connection than all the other events of life. The connection is real. He opens the gate of the grave and no man shuts. He shuts, and no man opens.

Job did not forget the Lord's gifts even while he was writhing under the stroke of His withdrawals. Alas! that it should so often need sorrow to bear into our hearts that we owe all to Him, but even then, if not before, it is well to remember how much good we have received of the Lord, and the remembrance should not be 'a sorrow's crown of sorrow,' but a thankful one.

IV. The thankful resignation to God's loving administration of the law.

The preceding words might be said with mere submission to an irresistible power, but this last sentence climbs to the highest of the true Christian idea. It recognises in loss and sorrow a reason for praise.

Why?

Because we may be sure that all loss is for our good.

Because we may be sure that all loss is from a loving God. In loss of dear ones, *our* gain is in drawing nearer to God, in being taught more to long for heaven. In our relation to them, a loftier love, a hallowing of all the past. *Their* gain is in their entrance to heaven, and all the glory that they have reached.

This blessing of God for loss is not inconsistent with sorrow, but anticipates the future when we shall know all and bless Him for all.

THE PEACEABLE FRUITS OF SORROWS RIGHTLY BORNE

'Behold, happy is the man whom God correcteth: therefore despise not thou the chastening of the Almighty: 18. For He maketh sore, and bindeth up: He woundeth, and His hands make whole. 19. He shall deliver thee in six troubles: yea, in seven there shall no evil touch thee. 20. In famine He shall redeem thee from death: and in war from the power of the sword. 21. Thou shalt be hid from the scourge of the tongue: neither shalt thou be afraid of destruction when it cometh. 22. At destruction and famine thou shalt laugh: neither shalt thou be afraid of the beasts of the earth. 23. For thou shalt be in league with the stones of the field: and the beasts of the field shall be at peace with thee. 24. And thou shalt know that thy tabernacle shall be in peace; and thou shalt visit thy habitation, and shalt not sin. 25. Thou shalt know also that thy seed shall be great, and thine offspring as the grass of the earth. 26. Thou shalt come to thy grave in a full age, like as a shock of corn cometh in in his season. 27. Lo this, we have searched it, so it is; hear it, and know thou it for thy good.'—JOB v. 17-27.

THE close of the Book of Job shows that his friends' speeches were defective, and in part erroneous. They all proceeded on the assumption that suffering was the fruit of sin—a principle which, though true in general, is not to be unconditionally applied to specific cases. They all forgot that good men might be exposed to it, not as punishment, nor even as correction, but as trial, to 'know what was in their hearts.'

Eliphaz is the best of the three friends, and his speeches embody much permanent truth, and rise, as in this passage, to a high level of literary and artistic beauty. There are few lovelier passages in Scripture than this glowing description of the prosperity of the man who accepts God's chastisements; and, on the whole, the picture is true. But the underlying belief in the uniform coincidence of inward goodness and outward good needs to be modified by the deeper teaching of the New Testament before it can be regarded as covering all the facts of life.

Eliphaz is gathering up, in our passage, the threads of his speech. He bases upon all that he has been

saying the exhortation to Job to be thankful for his sorrows. With a grand paradox, he declares the man who is afflicted to be happy. And therein he strikes an eternally true note. It is good to be made to drink a cup of sorrow. Flesh calls pain evil, but spirit knows it to be good. The list of our blessings is not only written in bright inks, but many are inscribed in black. And the reason why the sad heart should be a happy heart is because, as Eliphaz believed, sadness is God's fatherly correction, intended to better the subject of it. 'Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth,' says the Epistle to the Hebrews, in full accord with Eliphaz.

But his well-meant and true words flew wide of their mark, for two reasons. They were chillingly didactic, and it is vinegar upon nitre to stand over an agonised soul and preach platitudes in an unsympathetic voice. And they assumed unusual sin in Job as the explanation of his unparalleled pains, while the prologue tells us that his sufferings were not fruits of his sin, but trials of his righteousness. He was horrified at Job's words, which seemed to him full of rebellion and irreverence; and he made no allowance for the wild cries of an agonised heart when he solemnly warned the sufferer against 'despising' God's chastening. A more sympathetic ear would have detected the accent of faith in the groans.

The collocation, in verse 18, of making sore and binding up, does not merely express sequence, but also purpose. The wounding is in order to healing. The wounds are merciful surgery; and their intention is health, like the cuts that lay open an ulcer, or the scratches for vaccination. The view of suffering in these two verses is not complete, but it goes far

toward completeness in tracing it to God, in asserting its disciplinary intention, in pointing to the divine healing which is meant to follow, and in exhorting to submission. We may recall the beautiful expansion of that exhortation in Hebrews, where 'faint not' is added to 'despise not,' so including the two opposite and yet closely connected forms of misuse of sorrow, according as we stiffen our wills against it, and try to make light of it, or yield so utterly to it as to collapse. Either extreme equally misses the corrective purpose of the grief.

On this general statement follows a charming picture of the blessedness which attends the man who has taken his chastisement rightly. After the thunderstorm come sunshine and blue, and the song of birds. But, lovely as it is, and capable of application in many points to the life of every man who trustfully yields to God's will, it must not be taken as a literally and absolutely true statement of God's dealings with His children. If so regarded, it would hopelessly be shattered against facts; for the world is full of instances of saintly men and women who have not experienced in their outward lives such sunny calm and prosperity stretching to old age as are here promised. Eliphaz is not meant to be the interpreter of the mysteries of Providence, and his solution is decisively rejected at the close. But still there is much in this picture which finds fulfilment in all devout lives in a higher sense than his intended meaning.

The first point is that the devout soul is exempt from calamities which assail those around it. These are such as are ordinarily in Scripture recognised as God's judgments upon a people. Famine and war devastate, but

the devout soul abides in peace, and is satisfied. Now it is not true that faith and submission make a wall round a man, so that he escapes from such calamities. In the supernatural system of the Old Testament such exemptions were more usual than with us, though this very Book of Job and many a psalm show that devout hearts had even then to wrestle with the problem of the prosperity of the wicked and the indiscriminate fall of widespread calamities on the good and bad.

But in its deepest sense (which, however, is not Eliphaz's sense) the faithful man is saved from the evils which he, in common with his faithless neighbour, experiences. Two men are smitten down by the same disease, or lie dying on a battlefield, shattered by the same shell, and the one receives the fulfilment of the promise, 'there shall no evil touch thee,' and the other does not. For the evil in the evil is all sucked out of it, and the poison is wiped off the arrow which strikes him who is united to God by faith and submission. Two women are grinding at the same millstone, and the same blow kills them both; but the one is delivered, and the other is not. They who pass through an evil, and are not drawn away from God by it, but brought nearer to Him, are hid from its power. To die may be our deliverance from death.

Eliphaz's promises rise still higher in verses 22 and 23, in which is set forth a truth that in its deepest meaning is of universal application. The wild beasts of the earth and the stones of the field will be in league with the man who submits to God's will. Of course the beasts come into view as destructive, and the stones as injuring the fertility of the fields. There is, probably, allusion to the story of Paradise and the Fall. Man's relation to nature was disturbed by sin;

it will be rectified by his return to God. Such a doctrine of the effects of sin in perverting man's relation to creatures runs all through Scripture, and is not to be put aside as mere symbolism.

But the large truth underlying the words here is that, if we are servants of God, we are masters of everything. 'All things work together for good to them that love God.' All things serve the soul that serves God; as, on the other hand, all are against him that does not, and 'the stars in their courses fight against' those who fight against Him. All things are ours, if we are Christ's. The many mediæval legends of saints attended by animals, from St. Jerome and his lion downwards to St. Francis preaching to the birds, echo the thoughts here. A gentle, pure soul, living in amity with dumb creatures, has wonderful power to attract them. They who are at peace with God can scarcely be at war with any of God's creatures. Gentleness is stronger than iron bands. 'Cords of love' draw most surely.

Peace and prosperity in home and possessions are the next blessings promised (ver. 24). 'Thou shalt visit [look over] thy household, and shalt miss nothing.' No cattle have strayed or been devoured by evil beasts, or stolen, as all Job's had been. Alas! Eliphaz knew nothing about commercial crises, and the great system of credit by which one scoundrel's fall may bring down hundreds of good men and patient widows, who look over their possessions and find nothing but worthless shares. Yet even for those who find all at once that the herd is cut off from the stall, their tabernacle may still be in peace, and though the fold be empty they may miss nothing, if in the empty place they find God. That is what Christians may make out of

the words; but it is not what was originally meant by them.

In like manner the next blessing, that of a numerous posterity, does not depend on moral or religious condition, as Eliphaz would make out, and in modern days is not always regarded as a blessing. But note the singular heartlessness betrayed in telling Job, all whose flocks and herds had been carried off, and his children laid dead in their festival chamber, that abundant possessions and offspring were the token of God's favour. The speaker seems serenely unconscious that he was saying anything that could drive a knife into the tortured man. He is so carried along on the waves of his own eloquence, and so absorbed in stringing together the elements of an artistic whole, that he forgets the very sorrows which he came to comfort. There are not a few pious exhorters of bleeding hearts who are chargeable with the same sin. The only hand that will bind up without hurting is a hand that is sympathetic to the finger-tips. No eloquence or poetic beauty or presentation of undeniable truths will do as substitutes for that.

The last blessing promised is that which the Old Testament places so high in the list of good things—long life. The lovely metaphor in which that promise is couched has become familiar to us all. The ripe corn gathered into a sheaf at harvest-time suggests festival rather than sadness. It speaks of growth accomplished, of fruit matured, of the ministries of sun and rain received and used, and of a joyful gathering into the great storehouse. There is no reference in the speech to the uses of the sheaf after it is harvested, but we can scarcely avoid following its history a little farther than the 'grave' which to Eliphaz seems the

garner. Are all these matured powers to have no field for action? Were all these miracles of vegetation set in motion only in order to grow a crop which should be reaped, and there an end? What is to be done with the precious fruit which has taken so long time and so much cultivation to grow? Surely it is not the intention of the Lord of the harvest to let it rot when it has been gathered. Surely we are grown here and ripened and carried hence for something.

But that is not in our passage. This, however, may be drawn from it—that maturity does not depend on length of days; and, however Eliphaz meant to promise long life, the reality is that the devout soul may reckon on complete life, whether it be long or short. God will not call His children home till their schooling is done; and, however green and young the corn may seem to our eyes, He knows which heads in the great harvest-field are ready for removal, and gathers only these. The child whose little coffin may be carried under a boy's arm may be ripe for harvesting. Not length of days, but likeness to God, makes maturity; and if we die according to the will of God, it cannot but be that we shall come to our grave in a full age, whatever be the number of years carved on our tombstones.

The speech ends with a somewhat self-complacent exhortation to the poor, tortured man: 'We have searched it, so it is.' We wise men pledge our wisdom and our reputation that this is true. Great is authority. An ounce of sympathy would have done more to commend the doctrine than a ton of dogmatic self-confidence. 'Hear it, and know thou it for thyself.' Take it into thy mind. Take it into thy mind and heart,

and take it for thy good. It was a frosty ending, exasperating in its air of patronage, of superior wisdom, and in its lack of any note of feeling. So, of course, it set Job's impatience alight, and his next speech is more desperate than his former. When will well-meaning comforters learn not to rub salt into wounds while they seem to be dressing them?

TWO KINDS OF HOPE

'Whose hope shall be cut off, and whose trust shall be a spider's web.'—JOB viii. 14.

'And hope maketh not ashamed.'—ROMANS v. 5.

THESE two texts take opposite sides. Bildad was not the wisest of Job's friends, and he gives utterance to solemn commonplaces with partial truth in them. In the rough it is true that the hope of the ungodly perishes, and the limits of the truth are concealed by the splendour of the imagery and the perfection of artistic form in which the well-worn platitude is draped. The spider's web stretched glittering in the dewy morning on the plants, shaking its threaded tears in the wind, the flag in the dry bed of a nullah withering while yet green, the wall on which leaning a man will fall, are vivid illustrations of hopes that collapse and fail. But my other text has to do with hopes that do not fail. Paul thinks that he knows of hope that maketh not ashamed, that is, which never disappoints. Bildad was right if he was thinking, as he was, of hopes fixed on earth; the Apostle was right, for he was thinking of hopes set on God. It is a commonplace that 'hope springs immortal in the human breast'; it is equally a commonplace that hopes are

disappointed. What is the conclusion from these two universal experiences? Is it the cynical one that it is all illusion, or is it that somewhere there must be an object on which hope may twine its tendrils without fear? God has given the faculty, and we may be sure that it is not given to be for ever balked. We must hope. Our hope may be our worst enemy; it may and should be our purest joy.

Let us then simply consider these two sorts of hope, the earthly and the heavenly, in their working in the three great realms of life, death, and eternity.

I. In life.

The faculty is inseparable from man's consciousness of immortality and of an indefinitely expansible nature which ever makes him discontented with the present. It has great purposes to perform in strengthening him for work, in helping him over sorrows, in making him buoyant and elastic, in painting for him the walls of the dungeon, and hiding for him the weight of the fetters.

But for what did he receive this great gift? Mainly that he might pass beyond the temporal and hold converse with the skies. Its true sphere is the unseen future which is at God's right hand.

We may run a series of antitheses, *e.g.*—

Earthly hope is so uncertain that its larger part is often fear.

Heavenly hope is fixed and sure. It is as certain as history.

Earthly hope realised is always less blessed than we expected. How universal the experience that there is little to choose between a gratified and a frustrated hope! The wonders inside the caravan are never so wonderful as the canvas pictures outside.

Heavenly hopes ever surpass the most rapturous anticipation. 'The half hath not been told.'

Earthly hopes are necessarily short-winged. They are settled one way or another, and sink hull down below our horizon.

Heavenly hope sets its object far off, and because a lifetime only attains it in part, it blesses a lifetime and outlasts it.

II. Hope in death.

That last hour ends for us all alike our earthly joys and relations. The slow years slip away, and each bears with it hopes that have been outlived, whether fulfilled or disappointed. One by one the lights that we kindle in our hall flicker out, and death quenches the last of them. But there is one light that burns on clear through the article of death, like the lamp in the magician's tomb. 'The righteous hath hope in his death.' We can each settle for ourselves whether we shall carry that radiant angel with her white wings into the great darkness, or shall sadly part with her before we part with life. To the earthly soul that last earthly hour is a black wall beyond which it cannot look. To the God-trusting soul the darkness is peopled with bright-faced hopes.

III. Hope in eternity.

It is not for our tongues to speak of what must, in the natural working out of consequences, be the ultimate condition of a soul which has not set its hopes on the God who alone is the right Object of the blessed but yet awful capacity of hoping, when all the fleeting objects which it sought as solace and mask of its own true poverty are clean gone from its grasp. Dante's tremendous words are more than enough to move wholesome horror in any thinking

soul: 'Leave hope behind, all ye who enter here. They are said to be unfeeling, grim, and mediæval, incredible in this enlightened age; but is there any way out of them, if we take into account what our nature is moulded to need and cling to, and what 'godless' men have done with it?

But let us turn to the brighter of these texts. 'Hope maketh not ashamed.' There will be an internal increase of blessedness, power, purity in that future, a fuller possession of God, a reaching out after completer likeness to Him. So if we can think of days in that calm state where time will be no more, 'to-morrow shall be as this day and much more abundant,' and the angel Hope, who kept us company through all the weary marches of earth, will attend on us still, only having laid aside the uncertainty that sometime veiled her smiles, but retaining all the buoyant eagerness for the ever unfolding wonders which gave us courage and cheer in the days of our flesh.

JOB'S QUESTION, JESUS' ANSWER

'If a man die, shall he live again?'—JOB xiv. 14.

'... I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: 26. And whosoever liveth and believeth in Me shall never die.'—JOHN xi. 25, 26.

JOB's question waited long for an answer. Weary centuries rolled away; but at last the doubting, almost despairing, cry put into the mouth of the man of sorrows of the Old Testament is answered by the Man of Sorrows of the New. The answer in words is this second text which may almost be supposed to allude to the ancient question. The answer, in fact, is the resurrection of Christ. Apart from this answer there is none.

So we may take these two texts to help us to grasp more clearly and feel more profoundly what the world owes to that great fact which we are naturally led to think of to-day.

I. The ancient and ever returning question.

The Book of Job is probably a late part of the Old Testament. It deals with problems which indicate some advance in religious thought. Solemn and magnificent, and for the most part sad; it is like a Titan struggling with large problems, and seldom attaining to positive conclusions in which the heart or the head can rest in peace. Here all Job's mind is clouded with a doubt. He has just given utterance to an intense longing for a life beyond the grave. His abode in Sheol is thought of as in some sense a breach in the continuity of his consciousness, but even that would be tolerable, if only he could be sure that, after many days, God would remember him. Then that longing gives way before the torturing question of the text, which dashes aside the tremulous hope with its insistent interrogation. It is not denial, but it is a doubt which palsies hope. But though he has no certainty, he cannot part with the possibility, and so goes on to imagine how blessed it would be if his longing were fulfilled. He thinks that such a renewed life would be like the 'release' of a sentry who had long stood on guard; he thinks of it as his swift, joyous 'answer' to God's summons, which would draw him out from the sad crowd of pale shadows and bring him back to warmth and reality. His hope takes a more daring flight still, and he thinks of God as yearning for His creature, as His creature yearns for Him, and having 'a desire to the work of His hands,' as if His heaven would be incomplete without His servant. But the

rapture and the vision pass, and the rest of the chapter is all clouded over, and the devout hope loses its light. Once again it gathers brightness in the twenty-first chapter, where the possibility flashes out starlike, that 'after my skin hath been thus destroyed, yet from my flesh shall I see God.'

These fluctuations of hope and doubt reveal to us the attitude of devout souls in Israel at a late era of the national life. And if they show us their high-water mark, we need not suppose that similar souls outside the Old Testament circle had solid certainty where these had but a variable hope. We know how large a development the doctrine of a future life had in Assyria and in Egypt, and I suppose we are entitled to say that men have always had the idea of a future. They have always had the thought, sometimes as a fear, sometimes as a hope, but never as a certainty. It has lacked not only certainty but distinctness. It has lacked solidity also, the power to hold its own and sustain itself against the weighty pressure of intrusive things seen and temporal.

But we need not go to the ends of the earth or to past generations for examples of a doubting, superficial hold of the truth that man lives through death and after it. We have only to look around us, and, alas! we have only to look within us. This age is asking the question again, and answering it in many tones, sometimes of indifferent disregard, sometimes flaunting a stark negative without reasoned foundation, sometimes with affirmatives with as little reason as these negatives. The modern world is caught in the rush and whirl of life, has its own sorrows to front, its own battles to fight, and large sections of it have never come as near an answer to Job's question as Job did.

II. Christ's all-sufficing answer.

He gave it there, by the grave of Lazarus, to that weeping sister, but He spoke these great words of calm assurance to all the world. One cannot but note the difference between His attitude in the presence of the great Mystery and that of all other teachers. How calmly, certainly, and confidently He speaks!

Mark that Jesus, even at that hour of agony, turns Martha's thoughts to Himself. What He is is the all-important thing for her to know. If she understands Him, life and death will have no insoluble problems nor any hopelessness for her. 'I am the Resurrection and the Life.' She had risen in her grief to a lofty height in believing that 'even now'—at this moment when help is vain and hope is dead—'whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give it thee,' but Jesus offers to her a loftier conception of Him when He lays a sovereign hand on resurrection and life, and discloses that both inhere in Him, and from Him flow to all who shall possess them. He claims to have in Himself the fountain of life, in all possible senses of the word, as well as in the special sense relevant at that sad hour. Further, He tells Martha that by faith in Him any and all may possess that life. And then He majestically goes on to declare that the life which He gives is immune from, and untouched by, death. The believer shall live though he dies, the living believer shall never die. It is clear that, in these two great statements, to die is used in two different meanings, referring in the former case to the physical fact, and in the latter carrying a heavier weight of significance, namely the pregnant sense which it usually has in this Gospel, of separation from God and consequently from the true life of the soul. Physical death is not the termination

of human life. The grim fact touches only the surface life, and has nothing to do with the essential, personal being. He that believes on Jesus, and he only, truly lives, and his union with Jesus secures his possession of that eternal life, which victoriously persists through the apparent, superficial change which men call death. Nothing dies but the death which surrounds the faithful soul. For it to die is to live more fully, more triumphantly, more blessedly. So though the act of physical death remains, its whole character is changed. Hence the New Testament euphemisms for death are much more than euphemisms. Men christen it by names which drape its ugliness, because they fear it so much, but Faith can play with Leviathan, because it fears it not at all. Hence such names as 'sleep,' 'exodus,' are tokens of the victory won for all believers by Jesus. He will show Martha the hope for all His 'followers which begins to dawn even in the calling of her brother back from the grip of death. And He shows us the great truth that His being the 'Life' necessarily involved His being also the 'Resurrection,' for His life-communicating work could not be accomplished till His all-quickening vitality had flowed over into, and flooded with its own conquering tides, not only the spirit which believes but its humble companion, the soul, and its yet humbler, the body. A bodily life is essential to perfect manhood, and Jesus will not stay His hand till every believer is full-summed in all his powers, and is perfect in body, soul, and spirit, after the image of Him who redeemed Him.

III. The pledge for the truth of the answer.

The words of Jesus are only words. These precious words, spoken to that one weeping sister in a little Jewish village, and which have brought hope to millions

ever since, are as baseless as all the other dreams and longings of the heart, unless Jesus confirms them by fact. If He did not rise from the dead, they are but another of the noble, exalted, but futile delusions of which the world has many others. If Christ be not risen, His words of consolation are swelling words of emptiness; His whole claims are ended, and the age-old question which Job asked is unanswered still, and will always remain unanswered. If Christ be not risen, the hopeless colloquy between Jehovah and the prophet sums up all that can be said of the future life: 'Son of man, can these bones live?' And I answered, 'O Lord God, Thou knowest!'

But Christ's resurrection is a fact which, taken in connection with His words while on earth, endorses these and establishes His claims to be the Declarer of the name of God, the Saviour of the world. It gives us demonstration of the continuity of life through and after death. Taken along with His ascension, which is but, so to speak, the prolongation of the point into a line, it declares that a glorified body and an abode in a heavenly home are waiting for all who by faith become here partakers in Jesus and are quickened by sharing in His life.

So in despite of sense and doubt and fear, notwithstanding teachers who, like the supercilious philosophers on Mars Hill, mock when they hear of a resurrection from the dead, we should rejoice in the great light which has shined into the region of the shadow of death, we should clasp His divine and most faithful answer to that old, despairing question, as the anchor of our souls, and lift up our hearts in thanksgiving in the triumphant challenge, 'O death! where is thy sting? O grave! where is thy victory?'

KNOWLEDGE AND PEACE

'Acquaint now thyself with Him, and be at peace : thereby good shall come unto thee.'—JOB xxii. 21.

IN the sense in which the speaker meant them, these words are not true. They mean little more than 'It pays to be religious.' What kind of notion of acquaintance with God Eliphaz may have had, one scarcely knows, but at any rate, the whole meaning of the text on his lips is poor and selfish.

The peace promised is evidently only outward tranquillity and freedom from trouble, and the good that is to come to Job is plainly mere worldly prosperity. This strain of thought is expressed even more clearly in that extraordinary bit of bathos, which with solemn irony the great dramatist who wrote this book makes this Eliphaz utter immediately after the text, 'The Almighty shall be thy defence and—thou shalt have plenty of silver!' It has not been left for commercial Englishmen to recommend religion on the ground that it produces successful merchants and makes the best of both worlds.

These friends of Job's all err in believing that suffering is always and only the measure of sin, and that you can tell a man's great guilt by observing his great sorrows. And so they have two main subjects on which they preach at their poor friend, pouring vitriol into his wounds: first, how wicked he must be to be so haunted by sorrows; second, how surely he will be delivered if he will only be religious after their pattern, that is, speak platitudes of conventional devotion and say, I submit.

This is the meaning of our text as it stands. But we

may surely find a higher sense in which it is true and take that to heart.

I. What is acquainting oneself with God?

The first thing to note is that this acquaintance depends on us. So then there must have been a previous objective manifestation on His part. Of course there must be a God to know, and there must be a way of knowing Him. For us Jesus Christ is the Revealer. What men know of God apart from Him is dim, shadowy, indistinct; it lacks certainty, and so is not knowledge. I venture to say that there is nothing between cultivated men and the loss of certain knowledge of God and conviction of His Being, but the historical revelation of Jesus Christ. The Christ reveals the inmost character of God, and that not in words but in deeds. Without Him no man knows God; 'No man knoweth the Father save the Son, and he to whom the Son will reveal Him.'

So then the objective revelation having been made, we must on our part embrace that revelation as ours. The act of so accepting begins with the familiar act of faith, which includes both an exercise of the understanding, as it embraces the facts of Christ's revelation of the Father, and of the will as it casts itself upon and submits to Him. But that exercise of faith is but the point which has to be drawn out into a golden line, woven into the whole length of a life. And it is in the continuity of that line that the average Christian so sadly fails, and because of that failure his acquaintance with God is so distant. How little time or thought we give to the character of God as revealed in Jesus Christ! We must be on intimate terms with Him. To know God, as to know a man, we must 'live with' Him, must summer and winter with Him, must bring

Him into the pettinesses of daily life, must let our love set to Him, must be in sympathy with Him, our wills being tuned to make harmony with His, our whole nature being in accord with His. That is work more than enough for a lifetime, enough to task it, enough to bless it.

II. The peace of acquaintance with God.

Eliphaz meant nothing more than mere earthly tranquillity and exemption from trouble, but his words are true in a far loftier region.

Knowledge of God as He really is brings peace, because His heart is full of love. We do but need to know the actual state of the heart of God towards us to be lapped and folded in peace that nothing outside of God and ourselves can destroy. If we lived under the constant benediction of the deepest truth in the universe, 'God is love,' our peace would be full. That is enough, if we believe it to bring peace. The thought of God which alarms and terrifies cannot be a true thought. But, alas! in proportion as we know ourselves, it becomes difficult to believe that God is love. The stings of conscience hiss prophecies to us of that in God which cannot but be antagonistic to that in us which conscience condemns. Only when our thought of God is drawn from the revelation of Him in Jesus Christ, does it become possible for any man to grasp in one act of his consciousness the conviction, I am a sinner, and the conquering conviction, God is Love, and only Love to me. So the old exhortation, 'Acquaint thyself with God and be at peace,' comes to be in Christian language: 'Behold God in Jesus, and thou shalt possess the peace of God to keep thy heart and mind.'

Knowledge of God gives peace, because in it we find the satisfaction of our whole nature. Thereby we are

freed from the unrest of tumultuous passions and storms of self-will. The internecine war between the better and the worse selves within ceases to rage, and when we have become God's friends, that in us which is meant to rule rules, and that in us which is meant to serve serves, and the inner kingdom is no longer torn asunder but is harmonised with itself.

Knowledge of God brings peace amid all changes, for he who has God for his continual Companion draws little of his supplies from without, and can be tranquil when the seas roar and are troubled and the mountains are cast into the midst of the sea. He bears all his treasures with him, and need fear no loss of any real good. And at last the angel of peace will lead us through the momentary darkness and guide us, after a passing shadow on our path, into 'the land of peace wherein we trusted,' while yet in the land of warfare. Jesus still whispers the ancient salutation with which He greeted the company in the upper room on the evening of the day of resurrection, as He comes to His servants here, and it will be His welcome to them when He receives them above.

III. The true good from acquaintance with God.

As we have already said, Eliphaz was only thinking, on Old Testament lines, that prosperity in material things was the theocratic reward of allegiance to Jehovah. He was rubbing vitriol into Job's sores, and avowedly regarding him as a fear-inspiring instance of the converse principle. But we have a better meaning breathed into his words, since Jesus has taught us what is the true good for a man all the days of his life. Acquaintance with God is, not merely procures, good. To know Him, to clasp Him to our hearts as our Friend, our Infinite Lover, our Source of all peace and

joy, to mould our wills to His and let Him dominate our whole selves, to seek our wellbeing in Him alone—what else or more can a soul need to be filled with all good? Acquaintance with God brings Him in all His sufficiency to inhabit else empty hearts. It changes the worst, according to the judgment of sense, into the best, transforming sorrow into loving discipline, interpreting its meaning, fitting us to bear it, and securing to us its blessings. To him that is a friend of God,

‘All is right that seems most wrong
If it be His sweet will.’

To be acquainted with God is the quintessence of good.
‘This is life eternal, to know Thee, the only true God,
and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent.’

WHAT LIFE MAY BE MADE

For then shalt thou have thy delight in the Almighty, and shalt lift up thy face unto God. 27. Thou shalt make thy prayer unto Him, and He shall hear thee, and thou shalt pay thy vows. 28. Thou shalt also decree a thing, and it shall be established unto thee: and the light shall shine upon thy ways. 29. When men are cast down, then thou shalt say, . . . lifting up; and He shall save the humble person.’—JOB xxii. 26-29.

THESE words are a fragment of one of the speeches of Job’s friends, in which the speaker has been harping on the old theme that affliction is the consequence and evidence of sin. He has much ado to square his theory with facts, and especially with the fact which brought him to Job’s dunghill. But he gets over the difficulty by the simple method of assuming that, since his theory must be true, there must be unknown facts which vindicate it in Job’s case; and since affliction is a sign of sin, Job’s afflictions are proof that he has been a sinner. So he charges him with grossest crimes,

without a shadow of other reason; and after having poured this oil of vitriol into his wounds by way of consolation, he advises him to be good, on the decidedly low and selfish ground that it will pay.

His often-quoted exhortation, 'Acquaint thyself with God, and be at peace: thereby good shall come unto thee,' is, in his meaning of it, an undisguised appeal to purely selfish considerations, and its promise is not in accordance with facts. Whether that saying is noble and true or ignoble and false, depends on the meanings attached to 'peace' and 'good.' A similar flaw mars the words of our text, as understood by the speaker. But they can be raised to a higher level than that on which he placed them, and regarded as describing the sweet and wonderful prerogatives of the devout life. So understood, they may rebuke and stimulate and encourage us to make our lives conformed to the ideal here.

I. I note, first, that life may be full of delight and confidence in God.

'Then shalt thou delight thyself in the Almighty, and shalt lift up thy face unto God.' Now when we 'delight' in a thing or a person, we recognise that that thing, or person, fits into a cleft in our hearts, and corresponds to some need in our natures. We not only recognise its good, sweetness, and adaptation to ourselves, but we actually possess in real fruition the sweetness that we recognise, and the good which we apprehend in it. And so these things, the recognition of the supreme sweetness and all-perfect adaptation and sufficiency of God to all that I need; the suppression of tastes and desires which may conflict with that sweetness, and the actual enjoyment and fruition of the sweetness and preciousness which I

apprehend—these things are the very heart of a man's religion. Without delight in God, there is no real religion.

The bulk of men are so sunken and embruted in animal tastes and sensuous desires and fleeting delights, that they have no care for the pure and calm joys which come to those who live near God. But above these stand the men, of whom there are a good many amongst us, whose religion is a matter of fear or of duty or of effort. And above them there stand the men who serve because they trust God, but whose religion is seeking rather than finding, and either from deficient consecration or from false conceptions of Him and of their relation to Him, is overshadowed by an unnatural and unwholesome gloom. And all these kinds of religion, the religion of fear, of duty, of effort, of seeking, and of doubt fighting with faith, are at the best woefully imperfect, and are, some of them, radically erroneous types of the religious life. He is the truly devout man who not only knows God to be great and holy, but feels Him to be sweet and sufficient; who not only fears, but loves; who not only seeks and longs, but possesses; or, in one word, true religion is delighting in God.

So herein is supplied a very sharp test for us. Do our tastes and inclinations set towards Him, and is He better to us than anything beside? Is God to me my dearest faith, the very home of my heart, to which I instinctively turn? Is the brightness of my day the light of His face? Is He the gladness of my joy? Is my Christianity a mill-horse round of service that I am not glad to render? Do I worship because I think it is duty, and are my prayers compulsory and mechanical; or do I worship because my heart goes

out to Him? And is my life calm and sweet because I 'delight in the Lord'?

The next words of my text will help us to answer. 'Thou shalt lift up thy face unto God.' That is a clear enough metaphor to express frank confidence of approach to Him. The head hangs down in the consciousness of demerit and sin. 'Mine iniquities have taken hold upon me,' wailed the Psalmist, 'so that I am not able to look up.' But it is possible for men to go into God's presence with a sense of peace, and to hold up their heads before their Judge and look Him in the eyes and not be afraid. And unless we have that confidence in Him, not because of our merits, but because of His certain love, there will be no 'delight in the Lord.' And there will be no such confidence in Him unless we have 'access with confidence by faith' in that Christ who has taken away our sins, and prepared the way for us into the Father's presence, and by whose death and sacrifice, and by it alone, we sinful men, with open face and uplifted foreheads, can stand to receive upon our visage the full beams of His light, and expatiate and be glad therein. There is no religion worth naming, of which the inmost characteristic is not delight in God. There is no 'delighting in God' possible for sinful men unless they can come to Him with frank confidence, and there is no such confidence possible for us unless we apprehend by faith, and thereby make our own, the great work of Jesus Christ our Lord.

II. So, secondly, note, such a life of delighting in God will be blessed by the frankest intercourse with Him.

'Thou shalt make thy prayer unto Him, and He shall hear thee, and thou shalt pay thy vows.' These

are three stages of this blessed communion that is possible for men. And note, prayer is not regarded in this aspect as duty, nor is it even dwelt upon as privilege, but as being the natural outcome and issue of that delighting in God and confident access to Him which have preceded. That is to say, if a man really has set his heart on God, and knows that in Him is all that he needs, then, of course, he will tell Him everything. As surely as the sunshine draws out the odours from the opening petals of the flowers, will the warmth of the felt divine light and love draw from our hearts the sweet confidence, which it is impossible not to give to Him in whom we delight.

If you have to be driven to prayer by a sense of duty, and if there be no impulse in your heart whispering ever to you, 'Tell your Love about it!' you have much need to examine into the reality, and certainly into the depth of your religion. For as surely as instinctive impulse, which needs no spurring from conscience or will, leads us to breathe our confidences to those that we love best, and makes us restless whilst we have a secret hid from them, so surely will a true love to God make it the most natural thing in the world to put all our circumstances, wants, and feeling into the shape of prayers. They may be in briefest words. They may scarcely be vocalised at all, but there will be, if there be a true love to Him, an instinctive turning to Him in every circumstance; and the single-worded cry, if it be no more, for help is sufficient. The arrow may be shot towards Heaven, though it be but slender and short, and it will reach its goal.

For my text goes on to the second stage, 'He shall hear thee.' That was not true as Eliphaz meant it.

But it is true if we remember the preceding conditions. The fundamental passage, which I suppose underlies part, at least, of our text, is that great word in the psalm, 'Delight thyself in the Lord, and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart.' Does that mean that if a man loves God he may get everything he wants? Yes! and No! If it is supposed to mean that our religion is a kind of key to God's storehouse, enabling us to go in there and rifle it at our pleasure, then it is not true; if it means that a man who delights himself in God will have his supreme desire set upon God, and so will be sure to get it, then it is true. Fulfil the conditions and you are sure of the promise. If our prayer in its deepest essence be 'Not my will, but Thine,' it will be answered. When the desires of our heart are for God, and for conformity to His will, as they will be when we 'delight ourselves in Him,' then we get our heart's desires. There is no promise of our being able to impose our wills upon God, which would be a calamity, and not a blessing, but a promise that they who make Him their joy and their desire will never be defrauded of their desire nor robbed of their joy.

And so the third stage of this frank intercourse comes. 'Thou shalt pay thy vows.' All life may become a thank-offering to God for the benefits that have flowed unceasing from His hands. First a prayer, then the answer, then the rendered thank-offering. Thus, in swift alternation and reciprocity, is carried on the commerce between Heaven and earth, between man and God. The desires rise to Heaven, but Heaven comes down to earth first; and prayer is not the initial stage, but the second, in the process. God first gives His promise. and the best prayer is the catching

up of God's promise and tossing it back again whence it came. Then comes the second downward motion, which is the answer to prayer, in blessing, and on it follows, finally, the reflection upwards, in thankful surrender and service, of the love that has descended on us, in answer to our desires. So like sunbeams from a mirror, or heat from polished metal, backwards and forwards, in continual alternation and reciprocity of influence and of love, flash and travel bright gleams between the soul and God. 'Truth springs out of the earth, and righteousness looks down from Heaven. Our God shall give that which is good, and the earth shall yield her increase.' Is there any other life of which such alternation is the privilege and the joy?

III. Then thirdly, such a life will neither know failure nor darkness.

'Thou shalt also decree a thing, and it shall be established unto thee, and the light shall shine upon thy ways.' Then is my will to be omnipotent, and am I to be delivered from the experiences of disappointments and failures and frustrated plans that are common to all humanity, and an essential part of its discipline, because I am a Christian man? Eliphaz may have meant that, but we know something far nobler. Again, I say, remember the conditions precedent. First of all, there must be the delight in God, and the desire towards Him, the submission of the will to Him, and the waiting before Him for guidance. I decree a thing—if I am a true Christian, and in the measure in which I am—only when I am quite sure that God has decreed it. And it is only His decrees, registered in the chancery of my will, of which I may be certain that they shall be established. There will

be no failures to the man whose life's purpose is to serve God, and to grow like Him; but if our purpose is anything less than that, or if we go arbitrarily and self-willedly resolving and saying, 'Thus I will; thus I command; let my will stand instead of all reason, we shall have our contemptuous 'decrees' disestablished many a time. If we run our heads against stone walls in that fashion, the walls will stand, and our heads will be broken. To serve Him and to fall into the line of His purpose, and to determine nothing, nor obstinately want anything until we are sure that it is His will—that is the secret of never failing in what we undertake.

We must understand a little more deeply than we are apt to do what is meant by 'success,' before we predict unfailing success for any man. But if we have obeyed the commandment from the psalm already quoted, which may be again alluded to in the words of my text—'Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in Him'—we shall inherit the ancient promise, 'and He shall bring it to pass.' 'All things work together for good to them that love God,' and in the measure of our love to Him are our discernment and realisation of what is truly good. Religion gives no screen to keep the weather off us, but it gives us an insight into the truth that storms and rain are good for the only crop that is worth growing here. If we understand what we are here for, we shall be very slow to call sorrow evil, and to crown joy with the exclusive title of blessing and good; and we shall have a deeper canon of interpretation for the words of my text than he who is represented as speaking them ever dreamed of.

So with the promise of light to shine upon our paths.

It is 'the light which never was on sea or land,' and not the material light which sense-bound eyes can see. That may all go. But if we have God in our hearts, there will be a light upon our way 'which knows no variableness, neither shadow of turning.' The Arctic winter, sunless though it be, has a bright heaven radiant with myriad stars, and flashing with strange lights born of no material or visible orb. And so you and I, if we delight ourselves 'in the Lord,' will have an unsetting sun to light our paths; 'and at eventide,' and in the mirkest midnight, 'there will be light' in the darkness.

IV Lastly, such a life will be always hopeful, and finally crowned with deliverance.

'When they'—that is, the ways that he has been speaking about—'when they are cast down, thou shalt say, Lifting up.' That is an exclamation or a prayer, and we might simply render, 'thou shalt say, Up!' Even in so blessed a life as has been described, times will come when the path plunges downwards into some 'valley of the shadow of death.' But even then the traveller will bate no jot of hope. He will in his heart say 'Up!' even while sense says 'Down!' either as expressing indomitable confidence and good cheer in the face of depressing circumstances, or as pouring out a prayer to Him who 'has showed him great and sore troubles' that He would 'bring him up again from the depths of the earth.' The devout life is largely independent of circumstances, and is upheld and calmed by a quiet certainty that the general trend of its path is upward, which enables it to trudge hopefully down an occasional dip in the road.

Such an obstinate hopefulness and cheery confidence are the natural result of the experiences already de-

scribed in the text. If we delight in God, hold communion with Him and have known Him as answering prayer, prospering our purposes and illuminating our paths, how shall we not hope? Nothing need depress nor perturb those whose joys and treasures are safe above the region of change and loss. If our riches are there where neither moth, rust, nor thieves can reach, our hearts will be there also, and an inward voice will keep singing, 'Lift up your heart.' It is the prerogative of experience to light up the future. It is the privilege of Christian experience to make hope certainty. If we live the life outlined in these verses we shall be able to bring June into December, and feel the future warmth whilst our bones are chilled with the present cold. 'When the paths are made low, thou shalt say, Up!'

And the end will vindicate such confidence. For the issue of all will be, 'He will save the humble person'; namely, the man who is of the character described, and who is 'lowly of eyes' in conscious unworthiness, even while he lifts up his face to God in confidence in his Father's love. The 'saving' meant here is, of course, temporary and temporal deliverance from passing outward peril. But we may permissibly give it wider and deeper meaning. Continuous partial deliverances lead on to and bring about final full salvation.

We read that into the words, of course. But nothing less than a complete and conclusive deliverance can be the legitimate end of the experience of the Christian life here. Absurdity can no further go than to suppose that a soul which has delighted itself in God, and looked in His face with frank confidence, and poured out his desires to Him, and been the recipient of

numberless answers, and the seat of numberless thank-offerings, has travelled along life's common way in cheerful godliness, has had the light of heaven shining on the path, and has found an immortal hope springing as the natural result of present experience, shall at the last be frustrated of all, and lie down in unconscious sleep, which is nothingness. If that were the end of a Christian life, then 'the pillared firmament were rottenness, and earth's base built on stubble.' No, no! A heaven of endless blessedness and close communion with God is the only possible ending to the facts of the devout life on earth.

We have such a life offered to us all and made possible through faith in Jesus Christ, in whom we may delight ourselves in the Lord, by whom we have 'access with confidence,' who is Himself the light of our hope, the answer of our prayers, the joy of our hearts, and who will 'deliver us from every evil work' as we travel along the road; 'and save us' at last 'into His heavenly kingdom,' where we shall be joined to the Delight of our souls, and drink for evermore of the fountain of life.

'THE END OF THE LORD'

'Then Job answered the Lord, and said, 2. I knew that Thou canst do every thing, and that no thought can be withholden from Thee. 3. Who is he that hideth counsel without knowledge? therefore have I uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not. 4. Hear, I beseech Thee, and I will speak: I will demand of Thee, and declare Thou unto me. 5. I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth Thee. 6. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes. 7. And it was so, that after the Lord had spoken these words unto Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite, My wrath is kindled against thee, and against thy two friends: for ye have not spoken of Me the thing that is right, as My servant Job hath. 8. Therefore take unto you now seven bullocks and seven rams, and go to My servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering; and My servant Job shall pray for you: for him will I accept: lest I deal with you after your folly, in that ye have not spoken of Me the thing which is right, like My servant Job. 9. So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad

the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went, and did according as the Lord commanded them: the Lord also accepted Job. 10. And the Lord turned the captivity of Job, when he prayed for his friends: also the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before.'—JOB xlii. 1-10.

THE close of the Book of Job must be taken in connection with its prologue, in order to get the full view of its solution of the mystery of pain and suffering. Indeed the prologue is more completely the solution than the ending is; for it shows the purpose of Job's trials as being, not his punishment, but his testing. The whole theory that individual sorrows were the result of individual sins, in the support of which Job's friends poured out so many eloquent and heartless commonplaces, is discredited from the beginning. The magnificent prologue shows the source and purpose of sorrow. The epilogue in this last chapter shows the effect of it in a good man's character, and afterwards in his life.

So we have the grim thing lighted up, as it were, at the two ends. Suffering comes with the mission of trying what stuff a man is made of, and it leads to closer knowledge of God, which is blessed; to lowlier self-estimation, which is also blessed; and to renewed outward blessings, which hide the old scars and gladden the tortured heart.

Job's final word to God is in beautiful contrast with much of his former unmeasured utterances. It breathes lowliness, submission, and contented acquiescence in a providence partially understood. It does not put into Job's mouth a solution of the problem, but shows how its pressure is lightened by getting closer to God. Each verse presents a distinct element of thought and feeling.

First comes, remarkably enough, not what might have been expected, namely, a recognition of God's

righteousness, which had been the attribute impugned by Job's hasty words, but of His omnipotence. God 'can do everything,' and none of His 'thoughts' or purposes can be 'restrained' (Rev. Ver.). There had been frequent recognitions of that attribute in the earlier speeches, but these had lacked the element of submission, and been complaint rather than adoration. Now, the same conviction has different companions in Job's mind, and so has different effects, and is really different in itself. The Titan on his rock, with the vulture tearing at his liver, sullenly recognised Jove's power, but was a rebel still. Such had been Job's earlier attitude, but now that thought comes to him along with submission, and so is blessed. Its recurrence here, as in a very real sense a new conviction, teaches us how old beliefs may flash out into new significance when seen from a fresh point of view, and how the very same thought of God may be an argument for arraigning and for vindicating His providence.

The prominence given, both in the magnificent chapters in which God answers Job out of the whirlwind and in this final confession, to power instead of goodness, rests upon the unspoken principle that 'the divine nature is not a segment, but a circle. Any one divine attribute implies all others. Omnipotence cannot exist apart from righteousness' (Davidson's *Job*, Cambridge Bible for Schools). A mere naked omnipotence is not God. If we rightly understand His power, we can rest upon it as a Hand sustaining, not crushing, us. 'He doeth all things well' is a conviction as closely connected with 'I know that Thou canst do all things' as light is with heat.

The second step in Job's confession is the acknowledgment of the incompleteness of his and all men's

materials and capacities for judging God's providence. Verse 3 begins with quoting God's rebuke (Job xxxviii. 2) It had cut deep, and now Job makes it his own confession. We should thus appropriate as our own God's merciful indictments, and when He asks, 'Who is it?' should answer with lowliness, 'Lord, it is I.' Job had been a critic; he is a worshipper. He had tried to fathom the bottomless, and been angry because his short measuring-line had not reached the depths. But now he acknowledges that he had been talking about what passed his comprehension, and also that his words had been foolish in their rashness.

Is then the solution of the whole only that old commonplace of the unsearchableness of the divine judgments? Not altogether; for the prologue gives, if not a complete, yet a real, key to them. But still, after all partial solutions, there remains the inscrutable element in them. The mystery of pain and suffering is still a mystery; and while general principles, taught us even more clearly in the New Testament than in this book, do lighten the 'weight of all this unintelligible world,' we have still to take Job's language as the last word on the matter, and say, 'How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out!'

For individuals, and on the wider field of the world, God's way is in the sea; but that does not bewilder those who also know that it is also in the sanctuary. Job's confession as to his rash speeches is the best estimate of many elaborate attempts to 'vindicate the ways of God to man.' It is better to trust than to criticise, better to wait than to seek prematurely to understand.

Verse 4, like verse 3, quotes the words of God (Job xxxviii. 3; xl. 7). They yield a good meaning, if regarded as a repetition of God's challenge, for the purpose of disclaiming any such presumptuous contest. But they are perhaps better understood as expressing Job's longing, in his new condition of humility, for fuller light, and his new recognition of the way to pierce to a deeper understanding of the mystery, by illumination from God granted in answer to his prayer. He had tried to solve his problem by much, and sometimes barely reverent, thinking. He had racked brain and heart in the effort, but he has learned a more excellent way, as the Psalmist had, who said, 'When I thought, in order to know this, it was too painful for me, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I.' Prayer will do more for clearing mysteries than speculation, however acute, and it will change the aspect of the mysteries which it does not clear from being awful to being solemn—veils covering depths of love, not clouds obscuring the sun.

The centre of all Job's confession is in verse 5, which contrasts his former and present knowledge of God, as being mere hearsay before, and eyesight now. A clearer understanding, but still more, a sense of His nearness, and an acquaintance at first hand, are implied in the bold words, which must not be interpreted of any outward revelation to sense, but of the direct, full, thrilling consciousness of God which makes all men's words about Him seem poor. That change was the master transformation in Job's case, as it is for us all. Get closer to God, realise His presence, live beneath His eye and with your eyes fixed on Him, and ancient puzzles will puzzle no longer, and wounds will cease to smart, and instead of angry expostulation or

bewildered attempts at construing His dealings, there will come submission, and with submission, peace.

The cure for questionings of His providence is experience of His nearness, and blessedness therein. Things that loomed large dwindle, and dangers melt away. The landscape is the same in shadow and sunshine; but when the sun comes out, even snow and ice sparkle, and tender beauty starts into visibility in grim things. So, if we see God, the black places of life are lighted; and we cease to feel the pressure of many difficulties of speculation and practice, both as regards His general providence and His revelation in law and gospel.

The end of the whole matter is Job's retractation of his words and his repentance. 'I abhor' has no object expressed, and is better taken as referring to the previous speeches than to 'myself.' He means thereby to withdraw them all. The next clause, 'I repent in dust and ashes,' carries the confession a step farther. He recognises guilt in his rash speeches, and bows before his God confessing his sin. Where are his assertions of innocence gone? One sight of God has scattered them, as it ever does. A man who has learned his own sinfulness will find few difficulties and no occasions for complaint in God's dealings with him. If we would see aright the meaning of our sorrows, we must look at them on our knees. Get near to God in heart-knowledge of Him, and that will teach our sinfulness, and the two knowledges will combine to explain much of the meaning of sorrow, and to make the unexplained residue not hard to endure.

The epilogue in prose which follows Job's confession, tells of the divine estimate of the three friends, of Job's sacrifice for them, and of his renewed outward

prosperity. The men who had tried to vindicate God's righteousness are charged with not having spoken that which is right; the man who has passionately impugned it is declared to have thus spoken. No doubt, Eliphaz and his colleagues had said a great many most excellent, pious things, and Job as many wild and untrue ones. But their foundation principle was not a true representation of God's providence, since it was the uniform connection of sin with sorrow, and the accurate proportion which these bore to each other.

Job, on the other hand, had spoken truth in his denials of these principles, and in his longings to have the righteousness of God set in clear relation to his own afflictions. We must remember, too, that the friends were talking commonplaces learned by rote, while Job's words came scalding hot from his heart. Most excellent truth may be so spoken as to be wrong; and it is so, if spoken heartlessly, regardless of sympathy, and flung at sufferers like a stone, rather than laid on their hearts as a balm. God lets a true heart dare much in speech; for He knows that the sputter and foam prove that 'the heart's deeps boil in earnest.'

Job is put in the place of intercessor for the three—a profound humiliation for them and an honour for him. They obeyed at once, showing that they have learned their lesson, as well as Job his. An incidental lesson from that final picture of the sufferer become the priest requiting accusations with intercession, is the duty of cherishing kind feelings and doing kind acts to those who say hard things of us. It would be harder for some of us to offer sacrifices for our Eliphazes than to argue with them. And yet another

is that sorrow has for one of its purposes to make the heart more tender, both for the sorrows and the faults of others.

Note, too, that it was 'when Job prayed for his friends' that the Lord turned his captivity. That is a proverbial expression, bearing witness, probably, to the deep traces left by the Exodus, for reversing calamity. The turning-point was not merely the confession, but the act, of beneficence. So, in ministering to others, one's own griefs may be soothed.

The restoration of outward good in double measure is not meant as the statement of a universal law of Providence, and still less as a solution of the problem of the book. But it is putting the truth that sorrows, rightly borne, yield peaceable fruit at the last, in the form appropriate to the stage of revelation which the whole book represents; that is, one in which the doctrine of immortality, though it sometimes rises before Job's mind as an aspiration of faith, is not set in full light.

To us, living in the blaze of light which Jesus Christ has let into the darkness of the future, the 'end of the Lord' is that heaven should crown the sorrows of His children on earth. We can speak of light, transitory affliction working out an eternal weight of glory. The book of Job is expressing substantially the same expectation, when it paints the calm after the storm and the restoration in double portion of vanished blessings. Many desolate yet trusting sufferers know how little such an issue is possible for their grief, but if they have more of God in clearer sight of Him, they will find empty places in their hearts and homes filled.

THE PROVERBS

A YOUNG MAN'S BEST COUNSELLOR

'The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel; 2. To know wisdom and instruction; to perceive the words of understanding; 3. To receive the instruction of wisdom, justice, and judgment, and equity; 4. To give subtilty to the simple, to the young man knowledge and discretion, 5. A wise man will hear, and will increase learning; and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels: 6. To understand a proverb, and the interpretation; the words of the wise, and their dark sayings. 7. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction. 8. My son, hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother: 9. For they shall be an ornament of grace unto thy head, and chains about thy neck. 10. My son, if sinners entice thee, consent thou not. 11. If they say, Come with us, let us lay wait for blood, let us lurk privily for the innocent without cause: 12. Let us swallow them up alive as the grave; and whole, as those that go down into the pit: 13. We shall find all precious substance, we shall fill our houses with spoil: 14. Cast in thy lot among us; let us all have one purse: 15. My son, walk not thou in the way with them; refrain thy foot from their path: 16. For their feet run to evil, and make haste to shed blood. 17. (Surely in vain the net is spread in the sight of any bird :) 18. And they lay wait for their own blood; they lurk privily for their own lives. 19. So are the ways of every one that is greedy of gain; which taketh away the life of the owners thereof.'—PROV. I. 1-19.

THIS passage contains the general introduction to the book of Proverbs. It falls into three parts—a statement of the purpose of the book (vs. 1-6); a summary of its foundation principles, and of the teachings to which men ought to listen (vs. 7-9); and an antithetic statement of the voices to which they should be deaf (vs. 10-19).

I. The aim of the book is stated to be twofold—to enable men, especially the young, to 'know wisdom,' and to help them to 'discern the words of understanding'; that is, to familiarise, by the study of the book, with the characteristics of wise teachings, so that there may be no mistaking seducing words of folly for these.

These two aims are expanded in the remaining verses, the latter of them being resumed in verse 6, while the former occupies the other verses.

We note how emphatically the field in which this wisdom is to be exercised is declared to be the moral conduct of life. 'Righteousness and judgment and equity' are 'wise dealing,' and the end of true wisdom is to practise these. The wider horizon of modern science and speculation includes much in the notion of wisdom which has no bearing on conduct. But the intellectual progress (and conceit) of to-day will be none the worse for the reminder that a man may take in knowledge till he is ignorant, and that, however enriched with science and philosophy, if he does not practise righteousness, he is a fool.

We note also the special destination of the book—for the young. Youth, by reason of hot blood and inexperience, needs such portable medicines as are packed in these proverbs, many of them the condensation into a vivid sentence of world-wide truths. There are few better guides for a young man than this book of homely sagacity, which is wisdom about the world without being tainted by the bad sort of worldly wisdom. But unfortunately those who need it most relish it least, and we have for the most part to re-discover its truths for ourselves by our own, often bitter, experience.

We note, further, the clear statement of the way by which incipient 'wisdom' will grow, and of the certainty of its growth if it is real. It is the 'wise man' who will 'increase in learning,' the 'man of understanding' who 'attains unto sound counsels.' The treasures are thrown away on him who has no heart for them. You may lavish wisdom on the 'fool,' and it will run off

him like water off a rock, fertilising nothing, and stopping outside him.

The Bible would not have met all our needs, nor gone with us into all regions of our experience, if it had not had this book of shrewd, practical common-sense. Christianity is the perfection of common sense. 'Godliness hath promise of the life which now is.' The wisdom of the serpent, which Jesus enjoins, has none of the serpent's venom in it. It is no sign of spirituality of mind to be above such mundane considerations as this book urges. If we hold our heads too high to look to our road and our feet, we are sure to fall into a pit.

II. Verses 7-9 may be regarded as a summary statement of the principle on which the whole book is based, and of the duty which it enjoins. The principle is that true wisdom is based on religion, and the duty is to listen to parental instruction. 'My son,' is the address of a teacher to his disciples, rather than of a father to his child. The characteristic Old Testament designation of religion as 'the fear of Jehovah' corresponds to the Old Testament revelation of Him as the Holy One,—that is, as Him who is infinitely separated from creatural being and limitations. Therefore is He 'to be had in reverence of all' who would be 'about Him'; that fear of reverential awe in which no slavish dread mingles, and which is perfectly consistent with aspiration, trust, and love. The Old Testament reveals Him as separate from men; the New Testament reveals Him as united to men in the divine man, Christ Jesus. Therefore its keynote is the designation of religion as 'the love of God'; but that name is no contradiction of the earlier, but the completion of it.

That fear is the beginning or basis of wisdom, because

wisdom is conceived of as God's gift, and the surest way to get it is to 'ask of God' (Jas. i. 5). Religion is, further, the foundation of wisdom, inasmuch as irreligion is the supreme folly of creatures so dependent on God, and so hungering after Him in the depths of their being, as we are. In whatever directions a godless man may be wise, in the most important matter of all, his relations to God, he is unwise, and the epitaph for all such is 'Thou fool!'

Further, religion is the fountain of wisdom, in the sense of the word in which this book uses it, since it opens out into principles of action, motives, and communicated powers, which lead to right apprehension and willing discharge of the duties of life. Godless men may be scientists, philosophers, encyclopædias of knowledge, but for want of religion, they blunder in the direction of their lives, and lack wisdom enough to keep them from wrecking the ship on the rocks.

The Israelitish parent was enjoined to teach his or her children the law of the Lord. Here the children are enjoined to listen to the instruction. Reverence for traditional wisdom was characteristic of that state of society, and since a divine revelation stood at the beginning of the nation's history, it was not unreasonable to look back for light. Nowadays, a belief's being our fathers' is with many a reason for not making it ours. But perhaps that is no more rational than the blind adherence to the old with which this emancipated generation reproaches its predecessors. Possibly there are some 'old lamps' better than the new ones now hawked about the streets by so many loud-voiced vendors. The youth of this day have much need of the exhortation to listen to the 'instruction' (by which is meant, not only teaching by word, but discipline by

act) of their fathers, and to the gentler voice of the mother telling of law in accents of love. These precepts obeyed will be fairer ornaments than jewelled necklaces and wreathed chaplets.

III. On one side of the young man are those who would point him to the fear of Jehovah; on the other are seducing whispers, tempting him to sin. That is the position in which we all stand. It is not enough to listen to the nobler voice. We have resolutely to stop our ears to the baser, which is often the louder. Facile yielding to the cunning inducements which strew every path, and especially that of the young, is fatal. If we cannot say 'No' to the base, we shall not say 'Yes' to the noble voice. To be weak is generally to be wicked; for in this world the tempters are more numerous, and to sense and flesh, more potent than those who invite to good.

The example selected of such enticers is not of the kind that most of us are in danger from. But the sort of inducements held out are in all cases substantially the same. 'Precious substance' of one sort or another is dangled before dazzled eyes; jovial companionship draws young hearts. The right or wrong of the thing is not mentioned, and even murder and robbery are presented as rather pleasant excitement, and worth doing for the sake of what is got thereby. Are the desirable consequences so sure? Is there no chance of being caught red-handed, and stoned then and there, as a murderer? The tempters are discreetly silent about that possibility, as all tempters are. Sin always deceives, and its baits artfully hide the hook; but the cruel barb is there, below the gay silk and coloured dressing, and it—not the false appearance of food which lured the fish—is what sticks in the bleeding mouth.

The teacher goes on, in verses 15 to 19, to supply the truth which the tempters tried to ignore. He does so in three weighty sentences, which strip the tinsel off the temptation, and show its real ugliness. The flowery way to which they coax is a way of 'evil'; that should be enough to settle the question. The first thing to ask about any course is not whether it is agreeable or disagreeable, but Is it right or wrong? Verse 17 is ambiguous, but probably the 'net' means the tempters' speech in verses 11 to 14, and the 'bird' is the young man supposed to be addressed. The sense will then be, 'Surely you are not foolish enough to fly right into the meshes, and to go with your eyes open into so transparent sin!'

Verse 18 points to the grim possibility already referred to, that the would-be murderers will be caught and executed. But its lesson is wider than that one case, and declares the great solemn truth that all sin is suicide. Who ever breaks God's law slays himself.

What is true about 'covetousness,' as verse 19 tells, is true about all kinds of sin—that it takes away the life of those who yield to it, even though it may also fill their purses, or in other ways may gratify their desires. Surely it is folly to pursue a course which, however it may succeed in its immediate aims, brings real death, by separation from God, along with it. He is not a very wise man who ties his gold round him when the ship founders. He is not parted from his treasure certainly, but it helps to sink him. We may get what we want by sinning, but we get also what we did not want or reckon on—that is, eternal death. 'This their way is their folly.' Yet, strange to tell, their posterity 'approve their sayings,' and follow their doings.

WISDOM'S CALL

'Wisdom crieth without; she uttereth her voice in the streets: 21. She crieth in the chief place of concourse, in the openings of the gates: in the city she uttereth her words, saying, 22. How long, ye simple ones, will ye love simplicity? and the scorers delight in their scorning, and fools hate knowledge? 23. Turn you at my reproof: behold, I will pour out my Spirit unto you, I will make known my words unto you. 24. Because I have called, and ye refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded; 25. But ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof: 26. I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh; 27. When your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind; when distress and anguish cometh upon you. 28. Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me: 29. For that they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the Lord: 30. They would none of my counsel; they despised all my reproof. 31. Therefore shall they eat of the fruit of their own way, and be filled with their own devices. 32. For the turning away of the simple shall slay them, and the prosperity of fools shall destroy them. 33. But whoso hearkeneth unto me shall dwell safely, and shall be quiet from fear of evil.'—PROVERBS I. 20-33.

OUR passage begins with a striking picture. A fair and queenly woman stands in the crowded resorts of men, and lifts up a voice of sweet entreaty—authoritative as well as sweet. Her name is Wisdom. The word is in the plural in the Hebrew, as if to teach that in this serene and lovely form all manifold wisdoms are gathered and made one. Who then is she? It is easy to say 'a poetical personification,' but that does not add much to our understanding. It is clear that this book means much more by Wisdom than a human quality merely; for august and divine attributes are given to her, and she is the co-eternal associate of God Himself. Dwelling in His bosom, she thence comes forth to inspire all human good deeds, to plead evermore with men, to enrich those who listen to her with choicest gifts. Intellectual clearness, moral goodness, religious devotion, are all combined in the idea of Wisdom as belonging to men.

The divine source of all, and the correspondence between the human and the divine nature, are taught in the residence of this personified Wisdom with God

before she dwelt with men. The whole of the manifold revelations, by which God makes known any part of His will to men, are her voice. Especially the call contained in the Old Testament revelation is the summons of Wisdom. But whether the writer of this book had any inkling of deeper truth still, or not, we cannot but connect the incomplete personification of divine Wisdom here with its complete incarnation in a Person who is 'the power of God and the wisdom of God,' and who embodies the lineaments of the grand picture of a Wisdom crying in the streets, even while it is true of Him that 'He does not strive nor cry, nor cause His voice to be heard in the streets'; for the crying, which is denied to be His, is ostentatious and noisy, and the crying which is asserted to be hers is the plain, clear, universal appeal of divine love as well as wisdom. The light of Christ 'lighteth every man that cometh into the world.'

The call of Wisdom in this passage begins with remonstrance and plain speech, giving their right names to men who neglect her voice. The first step in delivering men from evil—that is, from foolish—courses is to put very clearly before them the true character of their acts, and still more of their inclinations. Gracious offers and rich promises come after; but the initial message of Wisdom to such men as we are must be the accusation of folly. 'When she is come, she will convict the world of sin.'

The three designations of men in verse 22 are probably arranged so as to make a climax. First come 'the simple,' or, as the word means, 'open.' There is a *sancta simplicitas*, a holy ignorance of evil, which is sister to the highest wisdom. It is well to be ignorant as well as 'innocent of much transgression'; and there

is no more mistaken and usually insincere excuse for going into foul places than the plea that it is best to know the evil and so choose the good. That knowledge comes surely and soon enough without our seeking it. But there is a fatal simplicity, open-eared, like Eve, to the Tempter's whisper, which believes the false promises of sin, and as Bunyan has taught us, is companion of sloth and presumption.

Next come 'scorners,' who mock at good. A man must have gone a long way down hill before he begins to gibe at virtue and godliness. But the descent is steep, though the distance is long; and the 'simple' who begins to do what is wrong will come to sneer at what is right.

Then last comes the 'fool,' the name which, in Proverbs, is shorthand for mental stupidity, moral obstinacy, and dogged godlessness,—a foul compound, but one which is realised oftener than we think. A great many very superior intellects, cultivated ladies and gentlemen, university graduates, and the like, would be unceremoniously set down by divine wisdom as fools; and surely if account is taken of the whole compass and duration of our being, and of all our relations to things and persons seen and unseen, nothing can be more stupid than godlessness, however cultured. The word literally means coarse or thick, and may suggest the idea of stolid insensibility as the last stage in the downward progress.

But note that the charge is directed, not against deeds, but dispositions. Perverted love and perverted hatred underlie acts. The simple love simplicity, preferring to be unwarned against evil; the scorner finds delight in letting his rank tongue blossom into speech; and the false direction given to love gives a fatal

twist to its corresponding hate, so that the fool detests 'knowledge' as a thief the policeman's lantern. You cannot love what you should loathe, without loathing what you should love. Inner longings and revulsions settle character and acts.

Verse 23 passes into entreaty; for it is vain to rouse conscience by plain speech, unless something is offered to make better life possible. The divine Wisdom comes with a rod, but also with gifts; but if the rod is kissed, the rewards are possessed. The relation of clauses in verse 23 is that the first is the condition of the fulfilment of the second and third. If we turn at her reproof, two great gifts will be bestowed. Her spirit within will make us quick to hear and receive her words sounding without. Whatever other good follows on yielding to the call of divine Wisdom (and the remaining early chapters of Proverbs magnificently detail the many rich gifts that do follow), chief of all are spirits swift to hear and docile to obey her voice, and then actual communications to purged ears. Outward revelation without prepared hearts is water spilt upon rock. Prepared hearts without a message to them would be but multiplication of vain longings; and God never stultifies Himself, or gives mouths without sending meat to fill them. To the submissive spirit, there will not lack either disposition to hear or clear utterance of His will.

But now comes a pause. Wisdom has made her offers in the crowded streets, and amid all the noise and bustle her voice has rung out. What is the result? Nothing. Not a head has been turned, nor an eye lifted. The bustle goes on as before. 'They bought, they sold,' as if no voice had spoken. So, after the disappointed waiting of Wisdom, her voice peals out again,

but this time with severity in its tones. Note how, in verses 24 and 25, the sin of sins against the pleading Wisdom of God is represented as being simple indifference. 'Ye refused,' 'no man regarded,' 'set at nought,' 'would none of'—these are the things which bring down the heavy judgments. It does not need violent opposition or black crime to wreck a soul. Simply doing nothing when God speaks is enough to effect destruction. There is no need to lift up angry arms in hostility. If we keep them hanging listless by our sides, it is sufficient. The gift escapes us, if we simply keep our hands shut or held behind our backs. Alas, for ears which have not heard, for seeing eyes which have not seen because they loved evil simplicity and hated knowledge!

Then note the terrible retribution. That is an awful picture of the mocking laughter of Wisdom, accompanying the rush of the whirlwind and the groans of anguish and shrieks of terror. It is even more solemn and dreadful than the parallel representations in Psalm ii., for there the laughter indicates God's knowledge that the schemes of opponents are vain, but here it figures pleasure in calamities. Of course it is to be remembered that the Wisdom thus represented is not to be identified with God; but still the imagery is startling, and needs to be taken along with declarations that God has 'no pleasure in the death of the sinner,' and to be interpreted as indicating, with daring anthropomorphism, the inevitable character of the 'destruction,' and the uselessness of appeals to the Wisdom once despised. But we joyfully remember that the Incarnate Wisdom, fairer than the ancient personification, wept over the city which He knew must perish.

Verses 28-31 carry on the picture of too late repentance

and inevitable retribution. They who let Wisdom cry, and paid no heed, shall cry to her in their turn, and be unnoticed. They whom she vainly sought shall vainly seek for her. Actions have their consequences, which are not annihilated because the doers do not like them. Thoughts have theirs; for the foolish not only eat of the fruit of their ways or doings, but are filled with their own devices or counsels. 'Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.' That inexorable law works, deaf to all cries, in the field of earthly life, both as regards condition and character; and that field of its operation is all that the writer of this book has in view. He is not denying the possibility of forgiveness, nor the efficacy of repentance, nor is he asserting that a penitent soul ever seeks God in vain; but he is declaring that it is too late to cry out for deliverance from consequences of folly when the consequences have us in their grip, and that wishes for deliverance are vain, though sighs of repentance are not. We cannot reap where we have not sowed. We must reap what we have. If we are such sluggards that we will 'not plough in winter by reason of the cold,' we shall 'beg in harvest and have nothing.'

But though the writer had probably only this life in view, Jesus Christ has extended the teaching to the next, when He has told of those who will seek to enter in and not be able. The experience of the fruits of their godlessness will make godless men wish to escape eating the fruits—and that wish shall be vain. It is not for us to enlarge on such words, but it is for us all to lay them to heart, and to take heed that we listen now to the beseeching call of the heavenly Wisdom in its tenderest and noblest form, as it appeared in Christ, the Incarnate Word.

Verses 32 and 33 generalise the preceding promises and warnings in a great antithesis. 'The backsliding [or, turning away] of the simple slays them.' There is allusion to Wisdom's call in verse 23. The simple had turned, but in the wrong direction—away from and not towards her. To turn away from heavenly Wisdom is to set one's face toward destruction. It cannot be too earnestly reiterated that we must make our choice of one of two directions for ourselves—either towards God, to seek whom is life, to find whom is heaven; or away from Him, to turn our backs on whom is to embrace unrest, and to be separate from whom is death. 'The security of fools,' by which is meant, not their safety, but their fancy that they are safe, 'destroys them.' No man is in such danger as the careless man of the world who thinks that he is all right. A traveller along the edge of a precipice in the night, who goes on as if he walked a broad road and takes no heed to his footing, will soon repent his rashness at the bottom, mangled and bruised. A man who in this changing world fancies that he sits as a king, and sees no sorrow, will have a rude wakening. A moment's heed saves hours of pain.

The alternative to this suicidal folly is in listening to Wisdom's call. Whoever does that will 'dwell safely,' not in fancied but real security; and in his quiet heart there need be no unrest from feared evils, for he will have hold of a charm which turns evils into good, and with such a guide he cannot go astray, nor with such a defender be wounded to death, nor with such a companion ever be solitary. If Christ be our Light, we shall not walk in darkness. If He be our Wisdom, we shall not err. If He be our Life, we shall never see death. If He is our Good, we shall fear no evil.

THE SECRET OF WELL-BEING

'My son, forget not my law; but let thine heart keep my commandments: 2. For length of days, and long life, and peace, shall they add to thee. 3. Let not mercy and truth forsake thee: bind them about thy neck; write them upon the table of thine heart: 4. So shalt thou find favour and good understanding in the sight of God and man. 5. Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. 6. In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths. 7. Be not wise in thine own eyes: fear the Lord, and depart from evil. 8. It shall be health to thy navel, and marrow to thy bones. 9. Honour the Lord with thy substance, and with the firstfruits of all thine increase: 10. So shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy presses shall burst out with new wine.'

—PROVERBS xli. 1-10.

THE first ten verses of this passage form a series of five couplets, which enforce on the young various phases of goodness by their tendency to secure happiness or blessedness of various sorts. The underlying axiom is that, in a world ruled by a good Being, obedience must lead to well-being; but while that is in the general true, exceptions do occur, and good men do encounter evil times. Therefore the glowing promises of these verses are followed by two verses which deal with the explanation of good men's afflictions, as being results and tokens of God's fatherly love.

The first couplet is general in character. It inculcates obedience to the precepts of the teacher, and gives as reason the assurance that thereby long life and peace will be secured. True to the Old Testament conception of revelation as a law, the teacher sets obedience in the forefront. He is sure that his teaching contains the sufficient guide for conduct, and coincides with the divine will. He calls, in the first instance, for inward willing acceptance of His commandments; for it is the heart, not primarily the hands, which he desires should 'keep' them. The mother of all graces of conduct is the bowing of the will to divine authority. The will is the man, and where it ceases to lift itself up in self-sacrificing and self-determining rebellion, and dis-

solves into running waters of submission, these will flow through the life and make it pure. To obey self is sin, to obey God is righteousness. The issues of such obedience are 'length of days . . . and peace.'

Even if we allow for the difference between the Old and the New Testaments, it remains true that a life conformed to God's will tends to longevity, and that many forms of sin do shorten men's days. Passion and indulged appetites eat away the very flesh, and many a man's 'bones are full of the sin of his youth.' The profligate has usually 'a short life,' whether he succeeds in making it 'merry' or not.

'Peace' is a wide word, including all well-being. Ease-loving Orientals, especially when living in warlike times, naturally used the phrase as a shorthand expression for all good. Busy Westerns, torn by the distractions and rapid movement of modern life, echo the sigh for repose which breathes in the word. 'There is no joy but calm,' and the sure way to deepest peace is to give up self-will and live in obedience.

The second couplet deals with our relations to one another, and puts forward the two virtues of 'loving-kindness and truth'—that is truth, or faithfulness—as all-inclusive. They are the two which are often jointly ascribed to God, especially in the Psalms. Our attitude to one another should be moulded in God's to us all. The tiniest crystal has the same facets and angles as the largest. The giant hexagonal pillars of basalt, like our Scottish Staffa, are identical in form with the microscopic crystals of the same substance. God is our Pattern; goodness is likeness to Him.

These graces are to be bound about the neck, perhaps as an ornament, but more probably as a yoke by which the harnessed ox draws its burden. If we have them,

they will fit us to bear one another's burdens, and will lead to all human duties to our fellows.

These graces are also to be written on the 'table of the heart'; that is, are to be objects of habitual meditation with aspiration. If so, they will come to sight in life. He who practises them will 'find favour with God and man,' for God looks with complacency on those who display the right attitude to men; and men for the most part treat us as we treat them. There are surly natures which are not won by kindness, like black tarns among the hills, that are gloomy even in sunshine, and requite evil for good; but the most of men reflect our feelings to them.

'Good understanding' is another result. It is 'found' when it is attributed to us, so that the expression substantially means that the possessors of these graces will win the reputation of being really wise, not only in the fallible judgment of men, but before the pure eyes of the all-seeing God. Really wise policy coincides with loving-kindness and truth.

The remaining couplets refer to our relations to God. The New Testament is significantly anticipated in the pre-eminence given to trust; that is, faith. Nor less significant and profound is the association of self-distrust with trust in the Lord. The two things are inseparable. They are but the under and upper sides of one thing, or like the two growths that come from a seed—one striking downwards becomes the root; one piercing upwards becomes the stalk. The double attitude of trust and distrust finds expression in acknowledging Him in all our ways; that is, ordering our conduct under a constant consciousness of His presence, in accordance with His will, and in dependence on His help.

Such a relation to God will certainly, and with no exceptions, issue in His 'directing our paths,' by which is meant that He will be not only our Guide, but also our Roadmaker, showing us the way and clearing obstacles from it. Calm certitude follows on willingness to accept God's will, and whoever seeks only to go where God sends him will neither be left doubtful whither he should go, nor find his road blocked.

The fourth couplet is, in its first part, in inverted parallelism with the third; for it begins with self-distrust, and proceeds thence to 'fear of the Lord,' which corresponds to, and is, in fact, but one phase of, trust in Him. It is the reverent awe which has no torment, and is then purest when faith is strongest. It necessarily leads to departing from evil. Morality has its roots in religion. There is no such magnet to draw men from sin as the happy fear of God, which is likewise faith. Whoever separates devoutness from purity of life, this teacher does not. He knows nothing of religion which permits association with iniquity. Such conduct will tend to physical well-being, and in a deeper sense will secure soundness of life. Godlessness is the true sickness. He only is healthy who has a healthy, because healed, soul.

The fifth couplet appears at first as being a drop to a lower region. A regulation of the Mosaic law may strike some as out of place here. But it is to be remembered that our modern distinction of ceremonial and moral law was non-existent for Israel, and that the command has a wider application than to Jewish tithes. To 'honour God with our substance' is not necessarily to give it away for religious purposes, but to use it devoutly and as He approves.

Christianity has more to say about the distribution,

as well as the acquisition, of wealth, than professing Christians, especially in commercial communities, practically recognise. This precept grips us tight, and is much more than a ceremonial regulation. Many causes besides the devout use of property tend to wealth in our highly artificial state of society. The world tries to get it by shrewdness, unscrupulousness, and by many other vices which are elevated to the rank of virtues; but he who honours the Lord in getting and spending will generally have as much as his true needs and regulated desires require.

THE GIFTS OF HEAVENLY WISDOM

'My son, despise not the chastening of the Lord; neither be weary of His correction: 12. For whom the Lord loveth He correcteth; even as a father the son in whom he delighteth. 13. Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding. 14. For the merchandise of it is better than the merchandise of silver, and the gain thereof than fine gold. 15. She is more precious than rubies: and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her. 16. Length of days is in her right hand; and in her left hand riches and honour. 17. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. 18. She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her: and happy is every one that retaineth her. 19. The Lord by wisdom hath founded the earth; by understanding hath He established the heavens. 20. By His knowledge the depths are broken up, and the clouds drop down the dew. 21. My son, let not them depart from thine eyes: keep sound wisdom and discretion: 22. So shall they be life unto thy soul, and grace to thy neck. 23. Then shalt thou walk in thy way safely, and thy foot shall not stumble. 24. When thou liest down, thou shalt not be afraid: yea, thou shalt lie down, and thy sleep shall be sweet.'—PROVERBS iii. 11-24.

THE repetition of the words 'my son' at the beginning of this passage marks a new section, which extends to verse 20, inclusively, another section being similarly marked as commencing in verse 21. The fatherly counsels of these early chapters are largely reiterations of the same ideas, being line upon line. 'To write the same things to you, to me indeed is not grievous, but for you it is safe.' Many strokes drive the nail home. Exhortations to get Wisdom, based upon the blessings she brings, are the staple of the whole. If we look

carefully at the section (vers. 11-20), we find in it a central core (vers. 13-18), setting forth the blessings which Wisdom gives, preceded by two verses, inculcating the right acceptance of God's chastisements which are one chief means of attaining Wisdom, and followed by two verses (vers. 19, 20), which exalt her as being divine as well as human. So the portraiture of her working in humanity is framed by a prologue and epilogue, setting forth two aspects of her relation to God; namely, that she is imparted by Him through the discipline of trouble, and that she dwells in His bosom and is the agent of His creative work.

The prologue, then, points to sorrow and trouble, rightly accepted, as one chief means by which we acquire heavenly Wisdom. Note the profound insight into the meaning of sorrows. They are 'instruction' and 'reproof.' The thought of the Book of Job is here fully incorporated and assimilated. Griefs and pains are not tokens of anger, nor punishments of sin, but love-gifts meant to help to the acquisition of wisdom. They do not come because the sufferers are wicked, but in order to make them good or better. Tempests are meant to blow us into port. The lights are lowered in the theatre that fairer scenes may become visible on the thin screen between us and eternity. Other supports are struck away that we may lean hard on God. The voice of all experience of earthly loss and bitterness is, 'Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get Wisdom.' God himself becomes our Schoolmaster, and through the voice of the human teacher we hear His deeper tones saying, 'My son, despise not the chastening.'

Note, too, the assurance that all discipline is the fruit of Fatherly love. How many sad hearts in all ages

these few words have calmed and braced! How sharp a test of our childlike spirit our acceptance of them, when our own hearts are sore, is! How deep the peace which they bring when really believed! How far they go to solve the mystery of pain, and turn darkness into a solemn light!

Note, further, that the words 'despise' and 'be weary' both imply rather rejection with loathing, and thus express unsubmitive impatience which gets no good from discipline. The beautiful rendering of the Septuagint, which has been made familiar by its adoption in Hebrews, makes the two words express two opposite faults. They 'despise' who steel their wills against the rod, and make as if they did not feel the pain; they 'faint' who collapse beneath the blows, which they feel so much that they lose sight of their purpose. Dogged insensibility and utter prostration are equally harmful. He who meets life's teachings, which are a Father's correction, with either, has little prospect of getting Wisdom.

Then follows the main part of this section (vers. 13-18),—the praise of Wisdom as in herself most precious, and as bestowing highest good. 'The man that findeth Wisdom' reminds us of the peasant in Christ's parable, who found treasure hidden in a field, and the 'merchandise' in verse 14, of the trader seeking goodly pearls. But the finding in verse 13 is not like the rustic's in the parable, who was seeking nothing when a chance stroke of his plough or kick of his heel laid bare the glittering gold. It is the finding which rewards seeking. The figure of acquiring by trading, like that of the pearl-merchant in the companion parable, implies pains, effort, willingness to part with something in order to attain.

The nature of the price is not here in question. We know who has said, 'I counsel thee to buy of Me gold tried in the fire.' We buy heavenly Wisdom when we surrender ourselves. The price is desire to possess, and willingness to accept as an undeserved, unearned gift. But that does not come into view in our lesson. Only this is strongly put in it—that 'his heavenly Wisdom outshines all jewels, outweighs all wealth, and is indeed the only true riches. 'Rubies' is probably rather to be taken as 'corals,' which seem to have been very highly prized by the Jews, and, no doubt, found their way to them from the Indian Ocean *via* the Red Sea. The word rendered 'things thou canst desire' is better taken as meaning 'jewels.'

This noble and conclusive depreciation of material wealth in comparison with Wisdom, which is not merely intellectual, but rests on the fear of the Lord, and is goodness as well as understanding, never needed preaching with more emphasis than in our day, when more and more the commercial spirit invades every region of life, and rich men are the aristocrats and envied types of success. When will England and America believe the religion which they profess, and adjust their estimates of the best things accordingly? How many so-called Christian parents would think their son mad if he said, 'I do not care about getting rich; my goal is to be wise with God's Wisdom'? How few of us order our lives on the footing of this old teacher's lesson, and act out the belief that Wisdom is more than wealth! The man who heaps millions together, and masses it, fails in life, however a vulgar world and a nominal church may admire and glorify him. The man who wins Wisdom succeeds, however bare may be his cupboard, and however people may pity him for having

failed in life, because he has not drawn prizes in the Devil's lottery. His blank is a prize, and their prizes are blanks. This decisive subordination of material to spiritual good is too plainly duty and common sense to need being dwelt upon; but, alas! like a great many other most obvious, accepted truths, it is disregarded as universally as believed.

The inseparable accompaniments of Wisdom are next eloquently described. The picture is the poetical clothing of the idea that all material good will come to him who despises it all and clasps Wisdom to his heart. Some things flow from Wisdom possessed as usual consequences; some are inseparable from her. The gift in her right hand is length of days; that in her left, which, by its position, is suggested as inferior to the former, is wealth and honour—two goods which will attend the long life. No doubt such promises are to be taken with limitations; but there need be no doubt that, on the whole, loyal devotion to and real possession of heavenly Wisdom do tend in the direction of lengthening lives, which are by it delivered from vices and anxieties which cut many a career short, and of gathering round silver hairs reverence and troops of friends.

These are the usual consequences, and may be fairly brought into view as secondary encouragements to seek Wisdom. But if she is sought for the sake of getting these attendant blessings, she will not be found. She must be loved for herself, not for her dowry, or she will not be won. At the same time, the overstrained and fantastic morality, which stigmatises regard to the blessed results of a religious life as selfishness, finds no support in Scripture, as it has none in common sense. Would there were more of such selfishness!

Sometimes Wisdom's hands do not hold these outward gifts. But the connection between her and the next blessings spoken of is inseparable. Her ways are pleasantness and peace. 'In keeping'—not *for* keeping—'her commandments is great reward.' Inward delight and deep tranquillity of heart attend every step taken in obedience to Wisdom. The course of conduct so prescribed will often involve painful crucifying of the lower nature, but its pleasure far outweighs its pain. It will often be strewn with sharp flints, or may even have red-hot ploughshares laid on it, as in old ordeal trials; but still it will be pleasant to the true self. Sin is a blunder as well as a crime, and enlightened self-interest would point out the same course as the highest law of Wisdom. In reality, duty and delight are co-extensive. They are two names for one thing—one taken from consideration of its obligation; the other, from observation of its issues. 'Calm pleasures there abide.' The only complete peace, which fills and quiets the whole man, comes from obeying Wisdom, or what is the same thing, from following Christ. There is no other way of bringing all our nature into accord with itself, ending the war between conscience and inclination, between flesh and spirit. There is no other way of bringing us into amity with all circumstances, so that fortunate or adverse shall be recognised as good, and nothing be able to agitate us very much. Peace with ourselves, the world, and God, is always the consequence of listening to Wisdom.

The whole fair picture is summed up in verse 18: 'She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her.' This is a distinct allusion to the narrative of Genesis. The flaming sword of the cherub guard is sheathed, and access to the tree, which gives immortal life to those

who eat, is open to us. Mark how that great word 'life' is here gathering to itself at least the beginnings of higher conceptions than those of simple existence. It is swelling like a bud, and preparing to open and disclose the perfect flower, the life which stands in the knowledge of God and the Christ whom He has sent. Jesus, the incarnate Wisdom, is Himself 'the Tree of Life in the midst of the paradise of God.' The condition of access to it is 'laying hold' by the outstretched hand of faith, and keeping hold with holy obstinacy of grip, in spite of all temptations to slack our grasp. That retaining is the condition of true blessedness.

Verses 19 and 20 invest the idea of Wisdom with still loftier sublimity, since they declare that it is an attribute of God Himself by which creation came into being. The meaning of the writer is inadequately grasped if we take it to be only that creation shows God's Wisdom. This personified Wisdom dwells with God, is the agent of creation, comes with invitations to men, may be possessed by them, and showers blessings on them. The planet Neptune was divined before it was discovered, by reason of perturbations in the movements of the exterior members of the system, unaccountable unless some great globe of light, hitherto unseen, were swaying them in their orbits. Do we not see here like influence streaming from the unrisen light of Christ? Personification prepares for Incarnation. There is One who has been with the Father from the beginning, by whom all things came into being, whose voice sounds to all, who is the Tree of Life, whom we may all possess, and with whose own peace we may be peaceful and blessed for evermore.

Verses 21-24 belong to the next section of the great discourse or hymn. They add little to the preceding.

But we may observe the earnest exhortation to let wisdom and understanding be ever in sight. Eyes are apt to stray and clouds to hide the sun. Effort is needed to counteract the tendency to slide out of consciousness, which our weakness imposes on the most certain and important truths. A Wisdom which we do not think about is as good or as bad as non-existent for us. One prime condition of healthy spiritual life is the habit of meditation, thereby renewing our gaze upon the facts of God's revelation and the bearing of these on our conduct.

The blessings flowing from Wisdom are again dilated on, from a somewhat different point of view. She is the giver of life. And then she adorns the life she gives. One has seen homely faces so refined and glorified by the fair soul that shone through them as to be, 'as it were, the face of an angel.' Gracefulness should be the outward token of inward grace. Some good people forget that they are bound to 'adorn the doctrine.' But they who have drunk most deeply of the fountain of Wisdom will find that, like the fabled spring, its waters confer strange loveliness. Lives spent in communion with Jesus will be lovely, however homely their surroundings, and however vulgar eyes, taught only to admire staring colours, may find them dull. The world saw 'no beauty that they should desire Him,' in Him whom holy souls and heavenly angels and the divine Father deemed 'fairer than the sons of men'!

Safety and firm footing in active life will be ours if we walk in Wisdom's ways. He who follows Christ's footsteps will tread surely, and not fear foes. Quiet repose in hours of rest will be his. A day filled with happy service will be followed by a night full of calm

slumber. 'Whether we sleep or wake, we live' with Him; and, if we do both, sleeping and waking will be blessed, and our lives will move on gently to the time when days and nights shall melt into one, and there will be no need for repose; for there will be no work that wearies and no hands that droop. The last lying down in the grave will be attended with no terrors. The last sleep there shall be sweet; for it will really be awaking to the full possession of the personal Wisdom, who is our Christ, our Life in death, our Heaven in heaven.

THE TWO PATHS

'Hear, O my son, and receive my sayings; and the years of thy life shall be many, 11. I have taught thee in the way of wisdom; I have led thee in right paths. 12. When thou goest, thy steps shall not be straitened; and when thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble. 13. Take fast hold of instruction; let her not go: keep her; for she is thy life. 14. Enter not into the path of the wicked, and go not in the way of evil men. 15. Avoid it, pass not by it, turn from it, and pass away. 16. For they sleep not, except they have done mischief; and their sleep is taken away, unless they cause some to fall. 17. For they eat the bread of wickedness, and drink the wine of violence. 18. But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day. 19. The way of the wicked is as darkness; they know not at what they stumble.'—PROVERBS iv. 10-19.

THIS passage includes much more than temperance or any other single virtue. It is a perfectly general exhortation to that practical wisdom which walks in the path of righteousness. The principles laid down here are true in regard to drunkenness and abstinence, but they are intended to receive a wider application, and to that wider application we must first look. The theme is the old, familiar one of the two paths, and the aim is to recommend the better way by setting forth the contrasted effects of walking in it and in the other.

The general call to listen in verse 10 is characteristically enforced by the Old Testament assurance that

obedience prolongs life. That is a New Testament truth as well; for there is nothing more certain than that a life in conformity with God's will, which is the same thing as a life in conformity with physical laws, tends to longevity. The experience of any doctor will show that. Here in England we have statistics which prove that total abstainers are a long-lived people, and some insurance offices construct their tables accordingly.

After that general call to listen comes, in verse 11, the description of the path in which long life is to be found. It is 'the way of Wisdom'—that is, that which Wisdom prescribes, and in which therefore it is wise to walk. It is always foolish to do wrong. The rough title of an old play is *The Devil is an Ass*, and if that is not true about him, it is absolutely true about those who listen to his lies. Sin is the stupidest thing in the universe, for it ignores the plainest facts, and never gets what it flings away so much to secure.

Another aspect of the path is presented in the designation 'paths of uprightness,' which seems to be equivalent to those which belong to, or perhaps which consist of, uprightness. The idea of straightness or evenness is the primary meaning of the word, and is, of course, appropriate to the image of a path. In the moral view, it suggests how much more simple and easy a course of rectitude is than one of sin. The one goes straight and unswerving to its end; the other is crooked, devious, intricate, and wanders from the true goal. A crooked road is a long road, and an up-and-down road is a tiring road. Wisdom's way is straight, level, and steadily approaches its aim.

In verse 13 the image of the path is dropped for the moment, and the picture of the way of uprightness and

its travellers is translated into the plain exhortation to keep fast hold of 'instruction,' which is substantially equivalent to the queenly Wisdom of these early chapters of Proverbs. The earnestness of the repeated exhortations implies the strength of the forces that tend to sweep us, especially those of us who are young, from our grasp of that Wisdom. Hands become slack, and many a good gift drops from nerveless fingers; thieves abound who will filch away 'instruction,' if we do not resolutely hold tight by it. Who would walk through the slums of a city holding jewels with a careless grasp, and never looking at them? How many would he have left if he did? We do not need to do anything to lose instruction. If we will only do nothing to keep it, the world and our own hearts will make sure that we lose it. And if we lose it, we lose ourselves; for 'she is thy life,' and the mere bodily life, that is lived without her, is not worth calling the life of a man.

Verses 14 to 17 give the picture of the other path, in terrible contrast with the preceding. It is noteworthy that, while in the former the designation was the 'path of uprightness' or of 'wisdom,' and the description therefore was mainly of the characteristics of the path, here the designation is 'the path of the *wicked*,' and the description is mainly of the travellers on it. Righteousness was dealt with, as it were, in the abstract; but wickedness is too awful and dark to be painted thus, and is only set forth in the concrete, as seen in its doers. Now, it is significant that the first exhortation here is of a negative character. In contrast with the reiterated exhortations to keep wisdom, here are reiterated counsels to steer clear of evil. It is all about us, and we have to make a strong effort to keep

it at arm's-length. 'Whom resist' is imperative. True, negative virtue is incomplete, but there will be no positive virtue without it. We must be accustomed to say 'No,' or we shall come to little good. An outer belt of firs is sometimes planted round a centre of more tender and valuable wood to shelter the young trees; so we have to make a fence of abstinences round our plantation of positive virtues. The decalogue is mostly prohibitions. 'So did *not* I, because of the fear of God' must be our motto. In this light, entire abstinence from intoxicants is seen to be part of the 'way of Wisdom.' It is one, and, in the present state of England and America, perhaps the most important, of the ways by which we can 'turn from' the path of the wicked and 'pass on.'

The picture of the wicked in verses 16 and 17 is that of very grossly criminal sinners. They are only content when they have done harm, and delight in making others as bad as themselves. But, diabolical as such a disposition is, one sees it only too often in full operation. How many a drunkard or impure man finds a fiendish pleasure in getting hold of some innocent lad, and 'putting him up to a thing or two,' which means teaching him the vices from which the teacher has ceased to get much pleasure, and which he has to spice with the condiment of seeing an unaccustomed sinner's eagerness! Such people infest our streets, and there is only one way for a young man to be safe from them,—'avoid, pass not by, turn from, and pass on.' The reference to 'bread' and 'wine' in verse 17 seems simply to mean that the wicked men's living is won by their 'wickedness,' which procures bread, and by their 'violence,' which brings them wine. It is the way by which these are obtained that is culpable. We may

contrast this foul source of a degraded living with verse 13, where 'instruction' is set forth as 'the life' of the upright.

Verses 18 and 19 bring more closely together the two paths, and set them in final, forcible contrast. The phrase 'the perfect day' might be rendered, vividly though clumsily, 'the steady of the day'—that is, noon, when the sun seems to stand still in the meridian. So the image compares the path of the just to the growing brightness of morning dawn, becoming more and more fervid and lustrous, till the climax of an Eastern midday. No more sublime figure of the continuous progress in goodness, brightness, and joy, which is the best reward of walking in the paths of uprightness, can be imagined; and it is as true as it is sublime. Blessed they who in the morning of their days begin to walk in the way of wisdom; for, in most cases, years will strengthen their uprightness, and to that progress there will be no termination, nor will the midday sun have to decline westward to diminishing splendour or dismal setting, but that noontide glory will be enhanced, and made eternal in a new heaven. The brighter the light, the darker the shadow. That blaze of growing glory, possible for us all, makes the tragic gloom to which evil men condemn themselves the thicker and more doleful, as some dungeon in an Eastern prison seems pitch dark to one coming in from the blaze outside. 'How great is that darkness!' It is the darkness of sin, of ignorance, of sorrow, and what adds deeper gloom to it is that every soul that sits in that shadow of death might have been shining, a sun, in the spacious heaven of God's love.

MONOTONY AND CRISES

When thou goest, thy steps shall not be straitened; and when thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble.—PROVERBS iv. 12.

THE old metaphor likening life to a path has many felicities in it. It suggests constant change, it suggests continuous progress in one direction, and that all our days are linked together, and are not isolated fragments; and it suggests an aim and an end. So we find it perpetually in this Book of Proverbs. Here the 'way' has a specific designation, 'the way of Wisdom'—that is to say, the way which Wisdom teaches, and the way on which Wisdom accompanies us, and the way which leads to Wisdom. Now, these two clauses of my text are not merely an instance of the peculiar feature of Hebrew poetry called parallelism, in which two clauses, substantially the same, occur, but with a little pleasing difference. 'When thou goest'—that is, the monotonous tramp, tramp, tramp of slow walking along the path of an uneventful daily life, the humdrum 'one foot up and another foot down' which makes the most of our days. 'When thou runnest'—that points to the crises, the sudden spurts, the necessarily brief bursts of more than usual energy and effort and difficulty. And about both of them, the humdrum and the exciting, the monotonous and the startling, the promise comes that if we walk in the path of Wisdom we shall not get disgusted with the one and we shall not be overwhelmed by the other. 'When thou walkest, thy steps shall not be straitened; when thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble.'

But before I deal with these two clauses specifically, let me recall to you the condition, and the sole con-

dition, upon which either of them can be fulfilled in our daily lives. The book from which my text is taken is probably one of the very latest in the Old Testament, and you catch in it a very significant and marvellous development of the Old Testament thought. For there rises up, out of these early chapters of the Book of Proverbs, that august and serene figure of the queenly Wisdom, which is more than a personification and is less than a person and a prophecy. It means more than the wise man that spoke it saw; it means for us Christ, 'the Power of God and the Wisdom of God.' And so instead of keeping ourselves merely to the word of the Book of Proverbs, we must grasp the thing that shines through the word, and realise that the writer's visions can only become realities when the serene and august Wisdom that he saw shimmering through the darkness took to itself a human Form, and 'the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.'

With that heightening of the meaning of the phrase, 'the path of Wisdom' assumes a heightened meaning too, for it is the path of the personal Wisdom, the Incarnate Wisdom, Christ Himself. And what does it *then* come to be to obey this command to walk in the way of Wisdom? Put it into three sentences. Let the Christ who is not only wise, but Wisdom, choose your path, and be sure that by the submission of your will all your paths are His, and not only yours. Make His path yours by following in His steps, and do in your place what you think Christ would have done if He had been there. Keep company with Him on the road. If we will do these three things—if we will say to Him, 'Lord, when Thou sayest go, I go; when Thou biddest me come, I come; I am Thy slave, and I rejoice in the bondage more than in all licentious liberty. and what

Thou biddest me do, I do'—if you will further say, 'As Thou art, so am I in the world'—and if you will further say, 'Leave me not alone, and let me cling to Thee on the road, as a little child holds on by her mother's skirt or her father's hand,' then, and only then, will you walk in the path of Wisdom.

Now, then, these three things—submission of will, conformity of conduct, closeness of companionship—these three things being understood, let us look for a moment at the blessings that this text promises, and first at the promise for long uneventful stretches of our daily life. That, of course, is mainly the largest proportion of all our lives. Perhaps nine-tenths at least of all our days and years fall under the terms of this first promise, 'When thou walkest.' For many miles there comes nothing particular, nothing at all exciting, nothing new, nothing to break the plod, plod, plod along the road. Everything is as it was yesterday, and the day before that, and as it will be to-morrow, and the day after that, in all probability. 'The trivial round, the common task' make up by far the largest percentage of our lives. It is as in wine, the immense proportion of it is nothing but water, and only a small proportion of alcohol is diffused through the great mass of the tamer liquid.

Now, then, if Jesus Christ is not to help us in the monotony of our daily lives, what, in the name of common sense, is His help good for? If it is not true that He will be with us, not only in the moments of crisis, but in the long commonplace hours, we may as well have no Christ at all, for all that I can see. Unless the trivial is His field, there is very little field for Him, in your life or mine. And so it should come to all of us who have to take up this daily burden of small, mono-

tonous, constantly recurring, and therefore often wearisome, duties, as even a more blessed promise than the other one, that 'when thou walkest, thy steps shall not be straitened.'

I remember hearing of a man that got so disgusted with having to dress and undress himself every day that he committed suicide to escape from the necessity. That is a very extreme form of the feeling that comes over us all sometimes, when we wake in a morning and look before us along the stretch of dead level, which is a great deal more wearisome when it lasts long than are the cheerful vicissitudes of up hill and down dale. We all know the deadening influence of a habit. We all know the sense of disgust that comes over us at times, and of utter weariness, just because we have been doing the same things day after day for so long. I know only one infallible way of preventing the common from becoming commonplace, of preventing the small from becoming trivial, of preventing the familiar from becoming contemptible, and it is to link it all to Jesus Christ, and to say, 'For Thy sake, and unto Thee, I do this'; then, not only will the rough places become plain, and the crooked things straight, and not only will the mountains be brought low, but the valleys of the commonplace will be exalted. 'Thy steps shall not be straitened.' 'I will make his feet as hind's feet,' says one of the old prophets. What a picture of light, buoyant, graceful movement that is! And each of us may have that, instead of the grind, grind, grind! tramp, tramp, tramp! along the level and commonplace road of our daily lives, if we will. Walk in the path of Christ, with Christ, towards Christ, and 'thy steps shall not be straitened.'

Now, there is another aspect of this same promise—

viz. if we thus are in the path of Incarnate Wisdom, we shall not feel the restrictions of the road to be restraints. 'Thy steps shall not be straitened'; although there is a wall on either side, and the road is the narrow way that leads to life, it is broad enough for the sober man, because he goes in a straight line, and does not need half the road to roll about in. The limits which love imposes, and the limits which love accepts, are not narrowing. 'I will walk at liberty, for—I do as I like.' No! that is slavery; but, 'I will walk at liberty, for I keep Thy precepts'; and I do not want to go vagrantising at large, but limit myself thankfully to the way which Thou dost mark out. 'Thy steps shall not be straitened.' So much for the first of these promises.

Now what about the other one? 'When thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble.'

As I have said, the former promise applies to the hours and the years of life. The latter applies to but a few moments of each man's life. Cast your thoughts back over your own days, and however changeful, eventful, perhaps adventurous, and as we people call it, romantic, some parts of our lives may have been, yet for all that you can put the turning-points, the crises that have called for great efforts, and the gathering of yourselves up, and the calling forth of all your powers to do and to dare, you can put them all inside of a week, in most cases. 'When thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble.' The greater the speed, the greater the risk of stumbling over some obstacle in the way. We all know how many men there are that do very well in the uneventful commonplaces of life, but bring them face to face with some great difficulty or some great trial, and there is a dismal failure. Jesus Christ

is ready to make us fit for anything in the way of difficulty, in the way of trial, that can come storming upon us from out of the dark. And He will make us so fit if we follow the injunctions to which I have already been referring. Without His help it is almost certain that when we have to run, our ankles will give, or there will be a stone in the road that we never thought of, and the excitement will sweep us away from principle, and we shall lose our hold on Him; and then it is all up with us.

There is a wonderful saying in one of the prophets, which uses this same metaphor of my text with a difference, where it speaks of the divine guidance of Israel as being like that of a horse in the wilderness. Fancy the poor, nervous, tremulous creature trying to keep its footing upon the smooth granite slabs of Sinai. Travellers dare not take their horses on mountain journeys, because they are highly nervous and are not sure-footed enough. And, so says the old prophet, that gracious Hand will be laid on the bridle, and hold the nervous creature's head up as it goes sliding over the slippery rocks, and so He will bring it down to rest in the valley. 'Now unto Him that is able to keep us from stumbling,' as is the true rendering, 'and to present us faultless . . . be glory.' Trust Him, keep near Him, let Him choose your way, and try to be like Him in it; and whatever great occasions may arise in your lives, either of sorrow or of duty, you will be equal to them.

But remember the virtue that comes out victorious in the crisis must have been nourished and cultivated in the humdrum moments. For it is no time to make one's first acquaintance with Jesus Christ when the eyeballs of some ravenous wild beast are staring into

ours, and its mouth is open to swallow us. Unless He has kept our feet from being straitened in the quiet walk, He will not be able to keep us from stumbling in the vehement run.

One word more. This same distinction is drawn by one of the prophets, who adds another clause to it. Isaiah, or the author of the second portion of the book which goes by his name, puts in wonderful connection the two thoughts of my text with analogous thoughts in regard to God, when he says, 'Hast thou not known, hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary?' and immediately goes on to say, 'They that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.' So it is from God, the unfainting and the unwearied, that the strength comes which makes our steps buoyant with energy amidst the commonplace, and steadfast and established at the crises of our lives. But before these two great promises is put another one: 'They shall mount up with wings as eagles,' and therefore both the other become possible. That is to say, fellowship with God in the heavens, which is made possible on earth by communion with Christ, is the condition both of the unwearied running and of unfainting walking. If we will keep in the path of Christ, He will take care of the commonplace dreary tracts and of the brief moments of strain and effort, and will bring us at last where He has gone, if, looking unto Him, we 'run with patience the race,' and walk with cheerfulness the road, 'that is set before us.'

FROM DAWN TO NOON

'The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day.'—PROVERBS IV. 18.

'Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their father.'—MATT. xiii. 43.

THE metaphor common to both these texts is not infrequent throughout Scripture. In one of the oldest parts of the Old Testament, Deborah's triumphal song, we find, 'Let all them that love Thee be as the sun when he goeth forth in his might.' In one of the latest parts of the Old Testament, Daniel's prophecy, we read, 'They that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever.' Then in the New Testament we have Christ's comparison of His servants to light, and the great promise which I have read as my second text. The upshot of them all is this—the most radiant thing on earth is the character of a good man. The world calls men of genius and intellectual force its lights. The divine estimate, which is the true one, confers the name on righteousness.

But my first text follows out another analogy; not only brightness, but progressive brightness, is the characteristic of the righteous man.

We are to think of the strong Eastern sun, whose blinding light steadily increases till the noontide. 'The perfect day' is a somewhat unfortunate translation. What is meant is the point of time at which the day culminates, and for a moment, the sun seems to stand steady, up in those southern lands, in the very zenith, raying down 'the arrows that fly by noonday.' The text does not go any further, it does not talk about the sad diminution of the afternoon. The parallel does not hold; though, if we consult appearance and sense

alone, it seems to hold only too well. For, sadder than the setting of the suns, which rise again to-morrow, is the sinking into darkness of death, from which there seems to be no emerging. But my second text comes in to tell us that death is but as the shadow of eclipse which passes, and with it pass obscuring clouds and envious mists, and 'then shall the righteous blaze forth like the sun in their Heavenly Father's kingdom.'

And so the two texts speak to us of the progressive brightness, and the ultimate, which is also the progressive, radiance of the righteous.

I. In looking at them together, then, I would notice, first, what a Christian life is meant to be.

I must not linger on the lovely thoughts that are suggested by that attractive metaphor of life. It must be enough, for our present purpose, to say that the light of the Christian life, like its type in the heavens, may be analysed into three beams—purity, knowledge, blessedness. And these three, blended together, make the pure whiteness of a Christian soul.

But what I wish rather to dwell upon is the other thought, the intention that every Christian life should be a life of increasing lustre, uninterrupted, and the natural result of increasing communion with, and conformity to, the very fountain itself of heavenly radiance.

Remember how emphatically, in all sorts of ways, progress is laid down in Scripture as the mark of a religious life. There is the emblem of my text. There is our Lord's beautiful one of vegetable growth: 'First the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear.' There is the other metaphor of the stages of human life, 'babes in Christ,' young men in Him, old men and fathers. There is the metaphor of the growth

of the body. There is the metaphor of the gradual building up of a structure. We are to 'edify ourselves together,' and to 'build ourselves up on our most holy faith.' There is the other emblem of a race—continual advance as the result of continual exertion, and the use of the powers bestowed upon us.

And so in all these ways, and in many others that I need not now touch upon, Scripture lays it down as a rule that life in the highest region, like life in the lowest, is marked by continual growth. It is so in regard to all other things. Continuity in any kind of practice gives increasing power in the art. The artisan, the blacksmith with his hammer, the skilled artificer at his trade, the student at his subject, the good man in his course of life, and the bad man in his, do equally show that use becomes second nature. And so, in passing, let me say what incalculable importance there is in our getting habit, with all its mystical power to mould life, on the side of righteousness, and of becoming accustomed to do good, and so being unfamiliar with evil.

Let me remind you, too, how this intention of continuous growth is marked by the gifts that are bestowed upon us in Jesus Christ. He gives us—and it is by no means the least of the gifts that He bestows—an absolutely unattainable aim as the object of our efforts. For He bids us not only be 'perfect, as our Father in Heaven is perfect,' but He bids us be entirely conformed to His own Self. The misery of men is that they pursue aims so narrow and so shabby that they can be attained, and are therefore left behind, to sink hull down on the backward horizon. But to have before us an aim which is absolutely unreachably, instead of being, as ignorant people say, an occasion of

despair and of idleness, is, on the contrary, the very salt of life. It keeps us young, it makes hope immortal, it emancipates from lower pursuits, it diminishes the weight of sorrows, it administers an anæsthetic to every pain. If you want to keep life fresh, seek for that which you can never fully find.

Christ gives us infinite powers to reach that unattainable aim, for He gives us access to all His own fullness, and there is more in His storehouses than we can ever take, not to say more than we can ever hope to exhaust. And therefore, because of the aim that is set before us, and because of the powers that are bestowed upon us to reach it, there is stamped upon every Christian life unmistakably as God's purpose and ideal concerning it, that it should for ever and for ever be growing nearer and nearer, as some ascending spiral that ever circles closer and closer, and yet never absolutely unites with the great central Perfection which is Himself.

So, brethren, for every one of us, if we are Christian people at all, 'this is the will of God, even your perfection.'

II. Consider the sad contrast of too many Christian lives.

I would not speak in terms that might seem to be reproach and scolding. The matter is far too serious, the disease far too widespread, to need or to warrant any exaggeration. But, dear brethren, there are many so-called and, in a fashion, really Christian people to whom Christ and His work are mainly, if not exclusively, the means of escaping the consequences of sin—a kind of 'fire-escape.' And to very many it comes as a new thought, in so far as their practical lives are concerned, that these ought to be lives of steadily

increasing deliverance from the love and the power of sin, and steadily increasing appropriation and manifestation of Christ's granted righteousness. There are, I think, many of us from whom the very notion of progress has faded away. I am sure there are some of us who were a great deal farther on on the path of the Christian life years ago, when we first felt that Christ was anything to us, than we are to-day. 'When for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you which be the first principles of the oracles of God.'

There is an old saying of one of the prophets that a child would die a hundred years old, which in a very sad sense is true about very many folk within the pale of the Christian Church who are seventy-year-old babes still, and will die so. Suns 'growing brighter and brighter until the noonday!' Ah! there are many of us who are a great deal more like those strange variable stars that sometimes burst out in the heavens into a great blaze, that brings them up to the brightness of stars of the first magnitude, for a day or two; and then they dwindle until they become little specks of light that the telescope can hardly see.

And there are hosts of us who are instances, if not of arrested, at any rate of unsymmetrical, development. The head, perhaps, is cultivated; the intellectual apprehension of Christianity increases, while the emotional, and the moral, and the practical part of it are all neglected. Or the converse may be the case; and we may be full of gush and of good emotion, and of fervour when we come to worship or to pray, and our lives may not be a hair the better for it all. Or there may be a disproportion because of an exclusive attention to conduct and the practical side of Christianity.

while the rational side of it, which should be the basis of all, and the emotional side of it, which should be the driving power of all, are comparatively neglected.

So, dear brethren! what with interruptions, what with growing by fits and starts, and long, dreary winters like the Arctic winters, coming in between the two or three days of rapid, and therefore brief and unwholesome, development, we must all, I think, take to heart the condemnation suggested by this text when we compare the reality of our lives with the divine intention concerning them. Let us ask ourselves, 'Have I more command over myself than I had twenty years ago? Do I live nearer Jesus Christ to-day than I did yesterday? Have I more of His Spirit in me? Am I growing? Would the people that know me best say that I am growing in the grace and knowledge of my Lord and Saviour?' Astronomers tell us that there are dark suns, that have burnt themselves out, and are wandering unseen through the skies. I wonder if there are any extinguished suns of that sort listening to me at this moment.

III. How the divine purpose concerning us may be realised by us.

Now the *Alpha* and the *Omega* of this, the one means which includes all other, is laid down by Jesus Christ Himself in another metaphor when He said, 'Abide in Me, and I in you; so shall ye bring forth much fruit.' Our path will brighten, not because of any radiance in ourselves, but in proportion as we draw nearer and nearer to the Fountain of heavenly radiance.

The planets that move round the sun, further away than we are on earth, get less of its light and heat; and these that circle around it within the limits of

our orbit, get proportionately more. The nearer we are to Him, the more we shall shine. The sun shines by its own light, drawn indeed from the shrinkage of its mass, so that it gives away its very life in warming and illuminating its subject-worlds. But we shine only by reflected light, and therefore the nearer we keep to Him the more shall we be radiant.

That keeping in touch with Jesus Christ is mainly to be secured by the direction of thought, and love, and trust to Him. If we follow close upon Him we shall not walk in darkness. It is to be secured and maintained very largely by what I am afraid is much neglected by Christian people of all sorts nowadays, and that is the devotional use of their Bibles. That is the food by which we grow. It is to be secured and maintained still more largely by that which I, again, am afraid is but very imperfectly attained to by Christian people now, and that is, the habit of prayer. It is to be secured and maintained, again, by the honest conforming of our lives, day by day, to the present amount of our knowledge of Him and of His will. Whosoever will make all his life the manifestation of his belief, and turn all his creed into principles of action, will grow both in the comprehensiveness, and in the depths of his Christian character. 'Ye are the light in the Lord.' Keep in Him, and you will become brighter and brighter. So shall we 'go from strength to strength, till we appear before God in Zion.'

IV. Lastly, what brighter rising will follow the earthly setting?

My second text comes in here. Beauty, intellect, power, goodness; all go down into the dark. The sun sets, and there is left a sad and fading glow in the darkening pensive sky, which may recall the vanished

light for a little while to a few faithful hearts, but steadily passes into the ashen grey of forgetfulness.

But 'then shall the righteous blaze forth like the sun, in their Heavenly Father's kingdom.' The momentary setting is but apparent. And ere it is well accomplished, a new sun swims into the 'ampler ether, the diviner air' of that future life, 'and with new spangled beams, flames in the forehead of the morning sky.'

The reason for that inherent brightness suggested in our second text is that the soul of the righteous man passes from earth into a region out of which we 'gather all things that offend, and them that do iniquity.' There are other reasons for it, but that is the one which our Lord dwells on. Or, to put it into modern scientific language, environment corresponds to character. So, when the clouds have rolled away, and no more mists from the undrained swamps of selfishness and sin and animal nature rise up to hide the radiance, there shall be a fuller flood of light poured from the re-created sun.

That brightness thus promised has for its highest and most blessed character that it is conformity to the Lord Himself. For, as you may remember, the last use of this emblem that we find in Scripture refers not to the servant but to the Master, whom His beloved disciple in Apocalyptic vision saw, with His 'countenance as the sun shining in his strength.' Thus 'we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.' And therefore that radiance of the sainted dead is progressive, too. For it has an infinite fulness to draw upon, and the soul that is joined to Jesus Christ, and derives its lustre from Him, cannot die until it has outgrown Jesus and emptied God. The sun will one day be a dark, cold ball. We shall outlast it.

But, brethren, remember that it is only those who here on earth have progressively appropriated the brightness that Christ bestows who have a right to reckon on that better rising. It is contrary to all probability to believe that the passage from life can change the ingrained direction and set of a man's nature. We know nothing that warrants us in affirming that death can revolutionise character. Do not trust your future to such a dim peradventure. Here is a plain truth. They who on earth are as 'the shining light that shineth more and more unto the perfect day,' shall, beyond the shadow of eclipse, shine on as the sun does, behind the opaque, intervening body, all unconscious of what looks to mortal eyes on earth an eclipse, and 'shall blaze out like the sun in their Heavenly Father's kingdom.' For all that we know and are taught by experience, religious and moral distinctions are eternal. 'He that is righteous, let him be righteous still; and he that is filthy, let him be filthy still.'

KEEPING AND KEPT

'Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.'—PROVERBS IV. 23.

'Kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation.'—1 PETER I. 5.

THE former of these texts imposes a stringent duty, the latter promises divine help to perform it. The relation between them is that between the Law and the Gospel. The Law commands, the Gospel gives power to obey. The Law pays no attention to man's weakness, and points no finger to the source of strength. Its office is to set clearly forth what we ought to be, not to aid us in becoming so. 'Here is

your duty, do it' is, doubtless, a needful message, but it is a chilly one, and it may well be doubted if it ever rouses a soul to right action. Moralists have hammered away at preaching self-restraint and a close watch over the fountain of actions within from the beginning, but their exhortations have little effect unless they can add to their icy injunctions the warmth of the promise of our second text, and point to a divine Keeper who will make duty possible. We must be kept by God, if we are ever to succeed in keeping our wayward hearts.

I. Without our guarding our hearts, no noble life is possible.

The Old Testament psychology differs from our popular allocation of certain faculties to bodily organs. We use head and heart, roughly speaking, as being respectively the seats of thought and of emotion. But the Old Testament locates in the heart the centre of personal being. It is not merely the home of the affections, but the seat of will, moral purpose. As this text says, 'the issues of life' flow from it in all the multitudinous variety of their forms. The stream parts into many heads, but it has one fountain. To the Hebrew thinkers the heart was the indivisible, central unity which manifested itself in the whole of the outward life. 'As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he.' The heart is the man. And that personal centre has a moral character which comes to light in, and gives unity and character to, all his deeds.

That solemn thought that every one of us has a definite moral character, and that our deeds are not an accidental set of outward actions but flow from an inner fountain, needs to be driven home to our consciences, for most of the actions of most men are

done so mechanically, and reflected on so little by the doers, that the conviction of their having any moral character at all, or of our incurring any responsibility for them, is almost extinct in us, unless when something startles conscience into protest.

It is this shrouded inner self to which supreme care is to be directed. All noble ethical teaching concurs in this—that a man who seeks to be right must keep, in the sense both of watching and of guarding, his inner self. Conduct is more easily regulated than character—and less worth regulating. It avails little to plant watchers on the stream half way to the sea. Control must be exercised at the source, if it is to be effectual. The counsel of our first text is a commonplace of all wholesome moral teaching since the beginning of the world. The phrase ‘with all diligence’ is literally ‘above all guarding,’ and energetically expresses the supremacy of this keeping. It should be the foremost, all-pervading aim of every wise man who would not let his life run to waste. It may be turned into more modern language, meaning just what this ancient sage meant, if we put it as, ‘Guard thy character with more carefulness than thou dost thy most precious possessions, for it needs continual watchfulness, and, untended, will go to rack and ruin.’ The exhortation finds a response in every heart, and may seem too familiar and trite to bear dwelling on, but we may be allowed to touch lightly on one or two of the plain reasons which enforce it on every man who is not what Proverbs very unpolitely calls ‘a fool.’

That guarding is plainly imposed as necessary, by the very constitution of our manhood. Our nature is evidently not a republic, but a monarchy. It is full

of blind impulses, and hungry desires, which take no heed of any law but their own satisfaction. If the reins are thrown on the necks of these untamed horses, they will drag the man to destruction. They are only safe when they are curbed and bitted, and held well in. Then there are tastes and inclinations which need guidance and are plainly meant to be subordinate. The will is to govern all the lower self, and conscience is to govern the will. Unmistakably there are parts of every man's nature which are meant to serve, and parts which are appointed to rule, and to let the servants usurp the place of the rulers is to bring about as wild a confusion within as the Ecclesiast lamented that he had seen in the anarchic times when he wrote—princes walking and beggars on horseback. As George Herbert has it—

‘Give not thy humours way ;

God gave them to thee under lock and key.’

Then, further, that guarding is plainly imperative, because there is an outer world which appeals to our needs and desires, irrespective altogether of right and wrong and of the moral consequences of gratifying these. Put a loaf before a starving man and his impulse will be to clutch and devour it, without regard to whether it is his or no. Show any of our animal propensities its appropriate food, and it asks no questions as to right or wrong, but is stirred to grasp its natural food. And even the higher and nobler parts of our nature are but too apt to seek their gratification without having the license of conscience for doing so, and sometimes in defiance of its plain prohibitions. It is never safe to trust the guidance of life to tastes, inclinations, or to anything but clear reason, set in

motion by calm will, and acting under the approbation of 'the Lord Chief Justice, Conscience.'

But again, seeing that the world has more evil than good in it, the keeping of the heart will always consist rather in repelling solicitations to yielding to evil. In short, the power and the habit of sternly saying 'No' to the whole crowd of tempters is always the main secret of a noble life. 'He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down and without walls.'

II. There is no effectual guarding unless God guards.

The counsel in Proverbs is not mere toothless moral commonplace, but is associated, in the preceding chapter, with fatherly advice to 'let thine heart keep my commandments' and to 'trust in the Lord with all thine heart.' The heart that so trusts will be safely guarded, and only such a heart will be. The inherent weakness of all attempts at self-keeping is that keeper and kept being one and the same personality, the more we need to be kept the less able we are to effect it. If in the very garrison traitors, how shall the fortress be defended? If, then, we are to exercise an effectual guard over our characters and control over our natures, we must have an outward standard of right and wrong which shall not be deflected by variations in our temperature. We need a fixed light to steer towards, which is stable on the stable shore, and is not tossing up and down on our decks. We shall cleanse our way only when we 'take heed thereto, according to Thy word.' For even God's vice-roy within, the sovereign conscience, can be warped, perverted, silenced, and is not immune from the spreading infection of evil. When it turns to God, as a mirror to the sun, it is irradiated and flashes bright illumination into dark corners, but its power depends

on its being thus lit by radiations from the very Light of Life. And if we are ever to have a coercive power over the rebellious powers within, we must have God's power breathed into us, giving grip and energy to all the good within, quickening every lofty desire, satisfying every aspiration that feels after Him, cowing all our evil and being the very self of ourselves.

We need an outward motive which will stimulate and stir to effort. Our wills are lamed for good, and the world has strong charms that appeal to us. And if we are not to yield to these, there must be somewhere a stronger motive than any that the sorceress world has in its stores, that shall constrainingly draw us to ways that, because they tend upward, and yield no pabulum for the lower self, are difficult for sluggish feet. To the writer of this Book of Proverbs the name of God bore in it such a motive. To us the name of Jesus, which is Love, bears a yet mightier appeal, and the motive which lies in His death for us is strong enough, and it alone is strong enough, to fire our whole selves with enthusiastic, grateful love, which will burn up our sloth, and sweep our evil out of our hearts, and make us swift and glad to do all that may please Him. If there must be fresh reinforcements thrown into the town of Mansoul, as there must be if it is not to be captured, there is one sure way of securing these. Our second text tells us whence the relieving force must come. If we are to keep our hearts with all diligence, we must be 'kept by the power of God,' and that power is not merely to make diversion outside the beleaguered fortress which may force the besiegers to retreat and give up their effort, but is to enter in and possess the soul which it wills to defend. It is when the enemy sees that new

succours have, in some mysterious way, been introduced, that he gives up his siege. It is God in us that is our security.

III. There is no keeping by God without faith.

Peter was an expert in such matters, for he had had a bitter experience to teach him how soon and surely self-confidence became self-despair. 'Though all should forsake Thee, yet will not I,' was said but a few hours before he denied Jesus. His faith failed, and then the divine guard that was keeping his soul passed thence, and, left alone, he fell.

That divine Power is exerted for our keeping on condition of our trusting ourselves to Him and trusting Him for ourselves. And that condition is no arbitrary one, but is prescribed by the very nature of divine help and of human faith. If God could keep our souls without our trust in Him He would. He does so keep them as far as is possible, but for all the choicer blessings of His giving, and especially for that of keeping us free from the domination of our lower selves, there must be in us faith if there is to be in God help. The hand that lays hold on God in Christ must be stretched out and must grasp His warm, gentle, and strong hand, if the tingling touch of it is to infuse strength. If the relieving force is victoriously to enter our hearts, we must throw open the gates and welcome it. Faith is but the open door for God's entrance. It has no efficacy in itself any more than a door has, but all its blessedness depends on what it admits into the hidden chambers of the heart.

I reiterate what I have tried to show in these poor words. There is no noble life without our guarding our hearts; there is no effectual guarding unless God guards; there is no divine guarding unless through

our faith. It is vain to preach self-governing and self-keeping. Unless we can tell the beleaguered heart, 'The Lord is thy Keeper; He will keep thee from all evil; He will keep thy soul,' we only add one more impossible command to a man's burden. And we do not apprehend nor experience the divine keeping in its most blessed and fullest reality, unless we find it in Jesus, who is 'able to keep us from falling, and to present us faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy.'

THE CORDS OF SIN

'His own iniquities shall take the wicked himself, and he shall be holden with the cords of his sins.'—PROVERBS v. 22.

IN Hosea's tender picture of the divine training of Israel which, alas! failed of its effect, we read, 'I drew them with cords of a man,' which is further explained as being 'with bands of love.' The metaphor in the prophet's mind is probably that of a child being 'taught to go' and upheld in its first tottering steps by leading-strings. God drew Israel, though Israel did not yield to the drawing. But if these gentle, attractive influences, which ever are raying out from Him, are resisted, another set of cords, not now sustaining and attracting, but hampering and fettering, twine themselves round the rebellious life, and the man is like a wild creature snared in the hunter's toils, enmeshed in a net, and with its once free limbs restrained. The choice is open to us all, whether we will let God draw us to Himself with the sweet manlike cords of His educative and forbearing love, or, flinging off these, which only foolish self-will construes into limitations,

shall condemn ourselves to be prisoned within the narrow room of our own sins. We may choose which condition shall be ours, but one or other of them must be ours. We may either be drawn by the silken cord of God's love or we may be 'holden by the cords' of our sins.

In both clauses of our text evil deeds done are regarded as having a strange, solemn life apart from the doer of them, by which they become influential factors in his subsequent life. Their issues on others may be important, but their issues on him are the most important of all. The recoil of the gun on the shoulder of him who fired it is certain, whether the cartridge that flew from its muzzle wounded anything or not. 'His own iniquities shall take the wicked'—they ring him round, a grim company to whom he has given an independent being, and who have now 'taken' him prisoner and laid violent hands on him. A long since forgotten novel told of the fate of 'a modern Prometheus,' who made and put life into a dreadful creature in man's shape, that became the curse of its creator's life. That tragedy is repeated over and over again. We have not done with our evil deeds when we have done them, but they, in a very terrible sense, begin to be when they are done. We sow the seeds broadcast, and the seed springs up dragon's teeth.

The view of human experience set forth, especially in the second clause of this text, directs our gaze into dark places, into which it is not pleasant to look, and many of you will accuse me of preaching gloomily if I try to turn a reflective eye inwards upon them, but no one will be able to accuse me of not preaching truly. It is impossible to enumerate all the cords that make up the net in which our own evil doings hold us meshed, but let me point out some of these.

I. Our evil deeds become evil habits.

We all know that anything once done becomes easier to do again. That is true about both good and bad actions, but 'ill weeds grow apace,' and it is infinitely easier to form a bad habit than a good one. The young shoot is green and flexible at first, but it soon becomes woody and grows high and strikes deep. We can all verify the statement of our text by recalling the tremors of conscience, the self-disgust, the dread of discovery which accompanied the first commission of some evil deed, and the silence of undisturbed, almost unconscious facility, that accompanied later repetitions of it. Sins of sense and animal passion afford the most conspicuous instances of this, but it is by no means confined to these. We have but to look steadily at our own lives to be aware of the working of this solemn law in them, however clear we may be of the grosser forms of evil deeds. For us all it is true that custom presses on us 'with a weight, heavy as frost and deep almost as life,' and that it is as hard for the Ethiopian to change his skin or the leopard his spots as for those who 'are accustomed to do evil' to 'do good.'

But experience teaches not only that evil deeds quickly consolidate into evil habits, but that as the habit grips us faster, the poor pleasure for the sake of which the acts are done diminishes. The zest which partially concealed the bitter taste of the once eagerly swallowed morsel is all but gone, but the morsel is still sought and swallowed. Impulses wax as motives wane, the victim is like an ox tempted on the road to the slaughter-house at first by succulent fodder held before it, and at last driven into it by pricking goads and heavy blows. Many a man is so completely wrapped in the net which his own evil deeds have made for him,

that he commits the sin once more, not because he finds any pleasure in it, but for no better reason than that he has already committed it often, and the habit is his master.

There are many forms of evil which compel us to repeat them for other reasons than the force of habit. For instance, a fraudulent book-keeper has to go on making false entries in his employer's books in order to hide his peculations. Whoever steps on to the steeply sloping road to which self-pleasing invites us, soon finds that he is on an inclined plane well greased, and that compulsion is on him to go on, though he may recoil from the descent, and be shudderingly aware of what the end must be. Let no man say, 'I will do this doubtful thing once only, and never again.' Sin is like an octopus, and if the loathly thing gets the tip of one slender filament round a man, it will envelop him altogether and drag him down to the cruel beak.

Let us then remember how swiftly deeds become habits, and how the fetters, which were silken at first, rapidly are exchanged for iron chains, and how the craving increases as fast as the pleasure from gratifying it diminishes. Let us remember that there are many kinds of evil which seem to force their own repetition, in order to escape their consequences and to hide the sin. Let us remember that no man can venture to say, 'This once only will I do this thing.' Let us remember that acts become habits with dreadful swiftness, and let us beware that we do not forge chains of darkness for ourselves out of our own godless deeds.

II. Our evil deeds imprison us for good.

The tragedy of human life is that we weave for ourselves manacles that fetter us from following and securing the one good for which we are made. Our

evil past holds us in a firm grip. The cords which confine our limbs are of our own spinning. What but ourselves is the reason why so many of us do not yield to God's merciful drawings of us to Himself? We have riveted the chains and twined the net that holds us captive, by our own acts. It is we ourselves who have paralysed our wills, so that we see the light of God but as a faint gleam far away, and dare not move to follow the gleam. It is we who have smothered or silenced our conscience and perverted our tastes, and done violence to all in us that 'thirsteth for God, even the living God.' Alas! how many of us have let some strong evil habit gain such a grip of us that it has overborne our higher impulses, and silenced the voice within us that cries out for the living God! We are kept back from Him by our worse selves, and whoever lets that which is lowest in him keep him from following after God, who is his 'being's end and aim,' is caught and prisoned by the cords woven and knitted out of his sins. Are there none of us who know, when they are honest with themselves, that they would have been true Christians long since, had it not been for one darling evil that they cannot make up their minds to cast off? Wills disabled from strongly willing the good, consciences silenced as when the tongue is taken out of a bell-buoy on a shoal, tastes perverted and set seeking amid the transitory treasures of earth for what God only can give them, these are the 'cords' out of which are knotted the nets that hold so many of us captive, and hinder our feet from following after God, even the living God, in following and possessing whom is the only liberty of soul, the one real joy of life.

III. Our evil deeds work their own punishment.

I do not venture to speak of the issues beyond the

grave. It is not for a man to press these on his brethren. But even from the standpoint of this Book of Proverbs, it is certain that 'the righteous shall be recompensed in the earth, much more the wicked and the sinner.' Probably it was the earthly consequences of wrongdoing that were in the mind of the proverb-maker. And we are not to let our Christian enlightenment as to the future rob us of the certainty, written large on human life here and now, that with whatever apparent exceptions in regard to prosperous sin and tried righteousness, it is yet true that 'every transgression and disobedience receives its just recompense of reward.' Life is full of consequences of evil-doing. Even here and now we reap as we have sown. Every sin is a mistake, even if we confine our view to the consequences sought for in this life by it, and the consequences actually encountered. 'A rogue is a roundabout fool.' True, we believe that there is a future reaping so complete that it makes the partial harvests gathered here seem of small account. But the framer of this proverb, who had little knowledge of that future, had seen enough in the meditative survey of this present to make him sure that the consequences of evil-doing were certain, and in a very true sense, penal. And leaving out of sight all that lies in the dark beyond, surely if we sum up the lamed aspirations, the perverted tastes, the ossifying of noble emotions, the destruction of the balance of the nature, the blinding of the eye of the soul, the lowering and narrowing of the whole nature, and many another wound to the best in man that come as the sure issue of evil deeds, we do not need to doubt that every sinful man is miserably 'holden with the cords of his sin.' Life is the time for sowing, but it is a time for reaping

too, and we do not need to wait for death to experience the truth of the solemn warning that 'he who soweth to the flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption.' Let us, then, do no deeds without asking ourselves, What will the harvest be? and if from any deeds that we have done we have to reap sorrow or inward darkness, let us be thankful that by experience our Father is teaching us how bitter as well as evil a thing it is to forsake Him, and cast off His fear from our wayward spirits.

IV. The cords can be loosened.

Bitter experience teaches that the imprisoning net clings too tightly to be stripped from our limbs by our own efforts. Nay rather, the net and the captive are one, and he who tries to cast off the oppression which hinders him from following that which is good is trying to cast off himself. The desperate problem that fronts every effort at self-emendation has two bristling impossibilities in it: one, how to annihilate the past; one, how to extirpate the evil that is part of my very self, and yet to keep the self entire. The very terms of the problem show it to be insoluble, and the climax of all honest efforts at making a clean thing of an unclean by means within reach of the unclean thing itself, is the despairing cry, 'O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me out of the body of this death?'

But to men writhing in the grip of a sinful past, or paralysed beyond writhing, and indifferent, because hopeless, or because they have come to like their captivity, comes one whose name is 'the Breaker,' whose mission it is to proclaim liberty to the captives, and whose hand laid on the cords that bind a soul, causes them to drop harmless from the limbs and sets the bondsman free. Many tongues praise Jesus for

many great gifts, but His proper work, and that peculiar to Himself alone, is His work on the sin and the sins of the world. He deals with that which no man can deal with for himself or by his own power. He can cancel our past, so that it shall not govern our future. He can give new power to fight the old habits. He can give a new life which owes nothing to the former self, and is free from taint from it. He can break the entail of sin, the 'law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus' can make any of us, even him who is most tied and bound by the chain of his sins, 'free from the law of sin and death.' We cannot break the chains that fetter us, and our own struggles, like the plungings of a wild beast caught in the toils, but draw the bonds tighter. But the chains that cannot be broken can be melted, and it may befall each of us as it befell the three Hebrews in the furnace, when the king 'was astonished' and asked, 'Did not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?' and wonderingly declared, 'Lo, I see four men loose walking in the midst of the fire, and the aspect of the fourth is like a son of the gods.'

WISDOM'S GIFT

'That I may cause those that love me to inherit substance.'—PROVERBS viii. 21.

THE word here rendered 'substance' is peculiar. Indeed, it is used in a unique construction in this passage. It means 'being' or 'existence,' and seems to have been laid hold of by the Hebrew thinkers, from whom the books commonly called 'the Wisdom Books' come, as one of their almost technical expressions. 'Substance' may be used in our translation in its philo-

sophical meaning as the supposed reality underlying appearances, but if we observe that in the parallel following clause we find 'treasures,' it seems more likely that in the text, it is to be taken in its secondary, and much debased meaning of wealth, material possessions. But the prize held out here to the lovers of heavenly wisdom is much more than worldly good. In deepest truth, the being which is theirs is God Himself. They who love and seek the wisdom of this book possess Him, and in possessing Him become possessed of their own true being. They are owners and lords of themselves, and have in their hearts a fountain of life, because they have God dwelling with and in them.

I. The quest which always finds.

'Those who love wisdom' might be a Hebrew translation of 'philosopher,' and possibly the Jewish teachers of wisdom were influenced by Greece, but their conception of wisdom has a deeper source than the Greek had, and what they meant by loving it was a widely different attitude of mind and heart from that of the Greek philosopher. It could never be said of the disciples of a Plato that their quest was sure to end in finding what they sought. Many a man then, and many a man since, and many a man to-day, has 'followed knowledge, like a sinking star,' and has only 'caught a glimmer of a far-off and dubious light. There is only one search which is certain always to find what it seeks, and that is the search which knows where the object of it is, and seeks not as for something the locality of which is unknown, but as for that which the place of which is certain. The manifold voices of human aims cry, 'Who will show us any good?' The seeker who is sure to find is he who prays, 'Lord, lift Thou up the light of Thy countenance upon us.' The

heart that truly and supremely affects God is never condemned to seek in vain. The Wisdom of this book herself is presented as proclaiming, 'They that seek me earnestly shall find me,' and humble souls in every age since then have set to their seal that the word is true to their experience. For there are two seekers in every such case, God and man. 'The Father seeketh such to worship Him,' and His love goes through the world, yearning and searching for hearts that will turn to Him. The shepherd seeks for the lost sheep, and lays it on his shoulders to bear it back to the fold. Jesus Christ is the incarnation of the seeking love of God. And the human seeker finds God, or rather is found by God, for no aspiration after Him is vain, no longing unresponded to, no effort to find Him unresponded to. We have as much of God as we wish, as much as our desires have fitted us to receive. The all-penetrating atmosphere enters every chink open to it, and no seeking soul has ever had to say, 'I sought Him but found Him not.'

Is there any other quest of which the same can be said? Are not all paths of human effort strewn with the skeletons of men who have fretted and toiled away their lives in vain attempts to grasp aims that have eluded their grip? Do we not all know the sickness of disappointed effort, or the sadder sickness of successful effort, which has secured the apparent good and found it not so good after all? The Christian life is, amid all the failures of human effort, the only life in which the seeking after good is but a little less blessed than the finding of it is, and in which it is always true that 'he that seeketh findeth.' Nor does such finding deaden the spirit of seeking, for in every finding there is a fresh discovery of new depths in God, and a consequent

quickenings of desire to press further into the abyss of His Being, so that aspiration and fruition ever beget each other, and the upward, Godward progress of the soul is eternal.

II. The finding that is always blessed.

We have seen that being is the gift promised to the lovers of wisdom, and that the promise may either be referred to the possession of God, who is the fountain of all being, or to the true possession of ourselves, which is a consequence of our possession of Him. In either aspect, that possession is blessedness. If we have God, we have real life. We truly own ourselves when we have God. We really live when God lives in us, the life of our lives. We are ourselves, when we have ceased to be ourselves, and have taken God to be the Self of ourselves.

Such a life, God-possessing, brings the one good which corresponds to our whole nature. All other good is fragmentary, and being fragmentary is inadequate, as men's restless search after various forms of good but too sadly proves. Why does the merchantman wander over sea and land seeking for many goodly pearls? Because he has not found one of great price, but tries to make up by their number for the insufficiency of each. But the soul is made, not to find its wealth in the manifold but in the one, and no aggregation of incompletenesses will make up completeness, nor any number of partial satisfactions of this and the other appetite or desire make a man feel that he has enough and more than enough. We must have all good in one Person, if we are ever to know the rest of full satisfaction. It will be fatal to our blessedness if we have to resort to a hundred different sources for different supplies. The true blessedness is simple and

yet infinitely complex, for it comes from possessing the one Person in whom dwell for us all forms of good, whether good be understood as intellectual or moral or emotional. That which cannot be everything to the soul that seeks is scarcely worth the seeking, and certainly is not wisely proposed as the object of a life's search, for such a life will be a failure if it fails to find its object, and scarcely less tragically, though perhaps less conspicuously, a failure if it finds it. All other good is but apparent; God is the one real object that meets all man's desires and needs, and makes him blessed with real blessedness, and fills the cup of life with the draught that slakes thirst and satisfies the thirstiest.

III. The blessedness that always lasts.

He who finds God, as every one of us may find Him, in Christ, has found a Good that cannot change, pass, or grow stale. His blessedness will always last, as long as he keeps fast hold of that which he has, and lets no man take his crown.

For the Christian's good is the only one that does not intend to grow old and pall. We can never exhaust God. We need never grow weary of Him. Possession robs other wealth of its glamour, and other pleasures of their poignant sweetness. We grow weary of most good things, and those which we have long had, we generally find get somewhat faded and stale. Habit is a fatal enemy to enjoyment. But it only adds to the joy which springs from the possession of God in Christ. Swedenborg said that the oldest angels look the youngest, and they who have longest experience of the joy of fellowship with God are they who enjoy each instance of it most. We can never drink the chalice of His love to the dregs, and it will be fresh and sparkling as long

as we have lips that can absorb it. He keeps the good wine till the last.

The Christian's good is the only good which cannot be taken away. Loss and change beggars the millionaire sometimes, and the possibility of loss shadows all earthly good with pale foreboding. Everything that is outside the substance of the soul can be withdrawn, but the possession of God in Christ is so intimate and inward, so interwoven with the very deepest roots of the Christian's personal being, that it cannot be taken out from these by any shocks of time or change. There is but one hand that can end that possession and that is his own. He can withdraw himself from God, by giving himself over to sin and the world. He can empty the shrine and compel the indwelling deity to say, as the legend told was heard in the Temple the night before Roman soldiers desecrated the Holy of Holies: Let us depart. But besides himself, 'neither things present, nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other creature' has power to take away that faithful God to whom a poor soul clings, and in whom whoso thus clings finds its unchangeable good.

The Christian's good is the only one from which we cannot be taken. A grim psalm paints for us the life and end of men 'who trust in the multitude of their possessions,' and whose 'inward thought is that they have founded families that will last.' It tells how 'this their way is folly,' and yet is approved with acclamations by the crowd. It lets us see the founder of a family, the possessor of broad acres, going down to the grave, carrying nothing away, stripped of his glory and with Death for his shepherd, who has driven his flock from pleasant pastures here into the dreariness of Sheol. But that shepherd has a double office. Some

he separates from all their possessions, hopes, and joys. Some he, stern though his aspect and harsh though his guidance, leads up to the green pastures of God, and as the last messenger of the love of God in Christ, unites the souls that found God amid the distractions of earth with the God whom they will know better and possess more fully and blessedly, amid the unending felicities and progressive blessednesses of Heaven.

WISDOM AND CHRIST

'Then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him; 31. Rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth; and my delights were with the sons of men.'—PROVERBS viii. 30, 31.

THERE is a singular difference between the two portions of this Book of Proverbs. The bulk of it, beginning with chapter x., contains a collection of isolated maxims which may be described as the product of sanctified common sense. They are shrewd and homely, but not remarkably spiritual or elevated. To these is prefixed this introductory portion, continuous, lofty in style, and in its personification of divine wisdom, rising to great sublimity both of thought and of expression. It seems as if the main body of the book had been fitted with an introduction by another hand than that of the compilers of the various sets of proverbial sayings. It is apparently due to an intellectual movement, perhaps not uninfluenced by Greek thought, and chronologically the latest of the elements composing the Old Testament scriptures. In place of the lyric fervour of prophets, and the devout intuition of psalmists, we have the praise of Wisdom. But that noble portrait is no copy of the Greek conception, but contains features peculiar to itself. She stands opposed to blatant, meretricious

Folly, and seeks to draw men to herself by lofty motives and offering pure delights. She is not a person. but she is a personification of an aspect of the divine nature, and seeing that she is held forth as willing to bestow herself on men, that queenly figure shadows the great truth of God's self-communication as being the end and climax of all His revelation.

We are on the wrong tack when we look for more or less complete resemblances between the 'Wisdom' of Proverbs and the 'Sophia' of Greek thinkers. It is much rather an anticipation, imperfect but real, of Jesus than a pale reflection of Greek thought. The way for the perfect revelation of God in the incarnation was prepared by prophet and psalmist. Was it not also prepared by this vision of a Wisdom which was always with God, and yet had its delights with the sons of men, and whilst 'rejoicing always before Him,' yet rejoiced in the habitable parts of the earth?

Let us then look, however imperfect our gaze may be, at the self-revelation in Proverbs of the personified divine Wisdom, and compare it with the revelation of the incarnate divine Word.

I. The Self-revelation of Wisdom.

The words translated in Authorised Version, 'As one brought up with him,' are rendered in Revised Version, 'as a master workman,' and seem intended to represent Wisdom—that is, of course, the divine Wisdom—as having been God's agent in the creative act. In the preceding context, she triumphantly proclaims her existence before His 'works of old,' and that she was with God, 'or ever the earth was.' Before the everlasting mountains she was, before fountains flashed in the light and refreshed the earth, her waters flowed. But that presence is not all, Wisdom was the divine

agent in creation. That thought goes beyond the ancient one: 'He spake and it was done.' Genesis regards the divine command as the cause of creatural being. God said, 'Let there be—and there was': the forthputting of His will was the impulse to which creatures sprang into existence at response. That is a great thought, but the meditative thinker in our text has pondered over the facts of creation, and notwithstanding all their apparent incompletenesses and errors, has risen to the conclusion that they can all be vindicated as 'very good.' To him, this wonderful universe is not only the product of a sovereign will, but of one guided in its operations by all-seeing Wisdom.

Then the relation of this divine Wisdom to God is represented as being a continual delight and a child-like rejoicing in Him, or as the word literally means, a 'sporting' in Him. Whatever energy of creative action is suggested by the preceding figure of a 'master workman,' that energy had no effort. To the divine Wisdom creation was an easy task. She was not so occupied with it as to interrupt her delight in contemplating God, and her task gave her infinite satisfaction, for she 'rejoiced always' before Him, and she rejoiced in His habitable earth. The writer does not shrink from ascribing to the agent of creation something like the glow of satisfaction that we feel over a piece of well-done work, the poet's or the painter's rapture as he sees his thoughts bodied forth in melody or glowing on canvas.

But there is a greater thought than these here, for the writer adds, 'and my delight was with the sons of men.' It is noteworthy that the same word is used in the preceding verse. The 'delight of the heavenly Wisdom

in God' is not unlike that directed to man. 'The sons of men' are the last, noblest work of Creation, and on them, as the shining apex, her delight settles. The words describe not only what was true when man came into being, as the utmost possible climax of creatural excellence, but are the revelation of what still remains true.

One cannot but feel how in all this most striking disclosure of the depths of God, a deeper mystery is on the verge of revelation. There is here, as we have said, a personification, but there seems to be a Person shining through, or dimly discerned moving behind, the curtain. Wisdom is the agent of creation. She creates with ease, and in creating delights in God as well as in her work, which calls for no effort in doing, and done, is all very good. She delights most of all in the sons of men, and that delight is permanent. Does not this unknown Jewish thinker, too, belong, as well as prophet and psalmist, to those who went before crying, Hosanna to Him that cometh in the name of the Lord? Let us turn to the New Testament and find an answer to the question.

II. The higher revelation of the divine Word.

There can be no doubt that the New Testament is committed to the teaching that the Eternal Word of God, who was incarnate in Jesus, was the agent of creation. John, in his profound prologue to the Gospel, utters the deepest truths in brief sentences of monosyllables, and utters them without a trace of feeling that they needed proof. To him they are axiomatic and self evident. 'All things were made by Him.' The words are the words of a child; the thought takes a flight beyond the furthest reach of the mind of men. Paul, too, adds his Amen when he proclaims that 'All

things have been created through Him and unto Him, and He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.' The writer of Hebrews declares a Son 'through whom also He made the worlds, and who upholds all things by the word of His power,' and does not scruple at transferring to Jesus the grand poetry of the Psalmist who hymned 'Thou, Lord, in the beginning, hast laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Thy hands.' We speak of things too deep for us when we speak of persons in the Godhead, but yet we know that the Eternal Word, which was from the beginning, was made flesh and dwelt among us. The personified Wisdom of Proverbs is the personal Word of John's prologue. John almost quotes the former when he says 'the same was in the beginning with God,' for his word recalls the grand declaration, 'The Lord possessed me in the beginning of His way . . . I was set up in the beginning or ever the earth was.' Then there are two beginnings, one lost in the depths of timeless being, one, the commencement of creative activity, and that Word was with God in the remotest, as in the nearer, beginning.

But the ancient vision of the Jewish thinker anticipated the perfect revelation of the New Testament still further, in its thought of an unbroken communion between the personified Wisdom and God. That dim thought of perfect communion and interchange of delights flashes into wondrous clearness when we think of Him who spake of 'the glory which I had with Thee before the foundation of the world,' and calmly declared: 'Thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world.' Into that depth of mutual love we cannot look, and our eyes are too dim-sighted to bear the blaze of that flashing interchange of glory, but we shall

rob the earthly life of Jesus of its pathos and saving power, if we do not recognise that in Him the personification of Proverbs has become a person, and that when He became flesh, He not only took on Him the garment of mortality, but laid aside 'the visible robes of His imperial majesty,' and that His being found in fashion as a man was humbling Himself beyond all humiliation that afterwards was His.

But still further, the Gospel reality fills out and completes the personification of Proverbs in that it shows us a divine person who so turned to 'the sons of men' that He took on Him their nature and Himself bore their sicknesses. The Jewish writer had great thoughts of the divine condescension, and was sure that God's love still rested on men, sinful as they were, but not even he could foresee the miracle of long-suffering love in the Incarnate Jesus, and he had no power of insight into the depths of the heart of God, that enabled him to foresee the sufferings and death of Jesus. Till that supreme self-sacrifice was a fact, it was inconceivable. Alas, now that it is a fact, to how many hearts that need it most is it still incredible. But passing all anticipation as it is, it is the root of all joy, the ground of all hope, and to millions of sinful souls it is their only refuge, and their sovereign example and pattern of life.

The Jewish thinker had a glimpse of a divine wisdom which delighted in man, but he did not dream of the divine stooping to share in man's sorrows, or of its so loving humanity as to take on itself its limitations, not only to pity these as God's images, but to take part of the same and to die. That man should minister to the divine delight is wonderful, but that God should participate in man's grief passes wonder. Thereby a new tenderness is given to the ancient personification, and

the august form of the divine Wisdom softens and melts into the yet more august and tender likeness of the divine Love. Nor is there only an adumbration of the redeeming love of Jesus as He dwells among us here, but we have to remember that Jesus delights in the sons of men when they love Him back again. All the sweet mysteries of our loving communion with Him, and of His joy in our faith, love, and obedience, all the secret treasures of His self-impartment to, and abiding in, souls that open themselves to His entrance, are suggested in that thought. We can minister to the joy of Jesus, and when He is welcomed into any heart, and any man's love answers His, He sees of the travail of His soul and is satisfied.

III. The call of the personal Word to each of us.

The Wisdom of Proverbs is portrayed in her queenly dignity, as calling men to herself, and promising them the satisfaction of all their needs. She describes herself that the description may draw men to her. The self-revelation of God is His mightiest means of attracting men to Him. We but need to know Him as He really is, in order to love Him and cling to Him. A fairer form than hers has drawn near to us, and calls us with tenderer invitations and better promises. The divine Wisdom has become Man with 'sweet human hands and lips and eyes.' Such was His delight in the sons of men that He emptied Himself of His glory, and finished a greater work than that over which he presided when the mountains were settled and the hills brought forth. Now He calls us, and His summons is tenderer, and gives promise of loftier blessings than the call of Wisdom was and did. She called to the simple, 'Come eat ye of my bread, and drink of the wine which I have mingled.' He invites us: 'If any man

thirst, let him come unto Me and drink,' and He furnishes a table for us, and calls us to eat of the bread which is His body broken for us, and to drink of the wine which is His blood shed for many for the remission of sins. She promises 'riches and honour, yea, durable riches and righteousness.' His voice vibrates with sympathy, and calls the weary and heavy laden, of whom she scarcely thinks, and offers to them a gift, which may seem humble enough beside her more dazzling offers of fruit, better than gold and revenues, better than choice silver, but which come closer to universal wants, the gift of rest, which is really what all men long for, and none but they who take His yoke upon them possess. 'See that ye refuse not Him that speaketh,' for if they escaped not when they refused her that spake through the Jewish thinker's lips of old, 'much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from Him that beseecheth us from heaven.' Jesus is the power of God and the wisdom of God, and it is in Him crucified that our weakness and our folly are made strong and wise, and Wisdom's ancient promise is fulfilled: 'Whoso findeth me findeth life, and shall obtain favour of the Lord.'

THE TWO-FOLD ASPECT OF THE DIVINE WORKING

'The way of the Lord is strength to the upright: but destruction shall be to the workers of iniquity. —PROVERBS x. 29.

YOU observe that the words 'shall be,' in the last clause, are a supplement. They are quite unnecessary. and in fact they rather hinder the sense. They destroy the completeness of the antithesis between the two

halves of the verse. If you leave them out, and suppose that the 'way of the Lord' is what is spoken of in both clauses, you get a far deeper and fuller meaning. 'The way of the Lord is strength to the upright; but destruction to the workers of iniquity.' It is the same way which is strength to one man and ruin to another, and the moral nature of the man determines which it shall be to him. That is a penetrating word, which goes deep down. The unknown thinkers, to whose keen insight into the facts of human life we are indebted for this Book of Proverbs, had pondered for many an hour over the perplexed and complicated fates of men, and they crystallised their reflections at last in this thought. They have in it struck upon a principle which explains a great many things, and teaches us a great many solemn lessons. Let us try to get a hold of what is meant, and then to look at some applications and illustrations of the principle.

I. First, then, let me just try to put clearly the meaning and bearing of these words. 'The way of the Lord' means, sometimes in the Old Testament and sometimes in the New, religion, considered as the way in which God desires a man to walk. So we read in the New Testament of 'the way' as the designation of the profession and practice of Christianity; and the way of the Lord' is often used in the Psalms for the path which He traces for man by His sovereign will.

But that, of course, is not the meaning here. Here it means, not the road in which God prescribes that we should walk, but that road in which He Himself walks; or, in other words, the sum of the divine action, the solemn footsteps of God through creation, providence, and history. 'His goings forth are from

everlasting.' 'His way is in the sea.' 'His way is in the sanctuary.' Modern language has a whole set of phrases which mean the same thing as the Jew meant by 'the way of the Lord,' only that God is left out. They talk about the 'current of events,' 'the general tendency of things,' 'the laws of human affairs,' and so on. I, for my part, prefer the old-fashioned 'Hebraism.' To many modern thinkers the whole drift and tendency of human affairs affords no sign of a person directing these. They hear the clashing and grinding of opposing forces, the thunder as of falling avalanches, and the moaning as of a homeless wind, but they hear the sounds of no footfalls echoing down the ages. This ancient teacher had keener ears. Well for us if we share his faith, and see in all the else distracting mysteries of life and history, 'the way of the Lord!'

But not only does the expression point to the operation of a personal divine Will in human affairs, but it conceives of that operation as one, a uniform and consistent whole. However complicated, and sometimes apparently contradictory, the individual events were, there was a unity in them, and they all converged on one result. The writer does not speak of 'ways,' but of 'the way,' as a grand unity. It is all one continuous, connected, consistent mode of operation from beginning to end.

The author of this proverb believed something more about the way of the Lord. He believed that although it is higher than our way, still, a man can know something about it; and that whatever may be enigmatical, and sometimes almost heart-breaking, in it, one thing is sure—that as we have been taught of late years in another dialect, it 'makes for righteousness.' 'Clouds

and darkness are round about Him,' but the Old Testament writers never falter in the conviction, which was the soul of all their heroism and the life blood of their religion, that in the hearts of the clouds and darkness, 'Justice and judgment are the foundations of His throne.' The way of the Lord, says this old thinker, is hard to understand, very complicated, full of all manner of perplexities and difficulties, and yet on the whole the clear drift and tendency of the whole thing is discernible, and it is this: it is all on the side of good. Everything that is good, and everything that does good, is an ally of God's, and may be sure of the divine favour and of the divine blessing resting upon it.

And just because that is so clear, the other side is as true; the same way, the same set of facts, the same continuous stream of tendency, which is all with and for every form of good, is all against every form of evil. Or, as one of the Psalmists puts the same idea, 'The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and His ears are open unto their cry. The face of the Lord is against them that do evil.' The same eye that beams in lambent love on 'the righteous' burns terribly to the evil doer. 'The face of the Lord' means the side of the divine nature which is turned to us, and is manifested by His self-revealing activity, so that the expression comes near in meaning to 'the way of the Lord,' and the thought in both cases is the same, that by the eternal law of His being, God's actions must all be for the good and against the evil.

They do not change, but a man's character determines which aspect of them he sees and has to experience. God's way has a bright side and a dark. You may take which you like. You can lay hold of the thing by whichever handle you choose. On the one side it

is convex, on the other concave. You can approach it from either side, as you please. 'The way of the Lord' must touch *your* 'way.' You cannot alter that necessity. Your path must either run parallel in the same direction with His, and then all His power will be an impulse to bear you onward; or it must run in the opposite direction, and then all His power will be for your ruin, and the collision with it will crush you as a ship is crushed like an egg-shell, when it strikes an iceberg. You *can* choose which of these shall befall you.

And there is a still more striking beauty about the saying, if we give the full literal meaning to the word 'strength.' It is used by our translators, I suppose, in a somewhat archaic and peculiar signification, namely, that of a stronghold. At all events the Hebrew means a fortress, a place where men may live safe and secure; and if we take that meaning, the passage gains greatly in force and beauty. This 'way of the Lord' is like a castle for the shelter of the shelterless good man, and behind those strong bulwarks he dwells impregnable and safe. Just as a fortress is a security to the garrison, and a frowning menace to the besiegers or enemies, so the 'name of the Lord is a strong tower,' and the 'way of the Lord' is a fortress. If you choose to take shelter within it, its massive walls are your security and your joy. If you do not, they frown down grimly upon you, a menace and a terror. How differently, eight hundred years ago, Normans and Saxons looked at the square towers that were built all over England to bridle the inhabitants! To the one they were the sign of the security of their dominion; to the other they were the sign of their slavery and submission. Torture and prison-houses

they might become; frowning portents they necessarily were. 'The way of the Lord' is a castle fortress to the man that does good, and to the man that does evil it is a threatening prison, which may become a hell of torture. It is 'ruin to the workers of iniquity.' I pray you, settle for yourself which of these it is to be to you.

II. And now let me say a word or two by way of application, or illustration, of these principles that are here.

First, let me remind you how the order of the universe is such that righteousness is life and sin is death. This universe and the fortunes of men are complicated and strange. It is hard to trace any laws, except purely physical ones, at work. Still, on the whole, things do work so that goodness is blessedness, and badness is ruin. That is, of course, not always true in regard of outward things, but even about them it is more often and obviously true than we sometimes recognise. Hence all nations have their proverbs, embodying the generalised experience of centuries, and asserting that, on the whole, 'honesty is the best policy,' and that it is always a blunder to do wrong. What modern phraseology calls 'laws of nature,' the Bible calls 'the way of the Lord'; and the manner in which these help a man who conforms to them, and hurt or kill him if he does not, is an illustration on a lower level of the principle of our text. This tremendous congeries of powers in the midst of which we live does not care whether we go with it or against it, only if we do the one we shall prosper, and if we do the other we shall very likely be made an end of. Try to stop a train, and it will run over you and murder you; get into it, and it will carry you smoothly along. Our lives are

surrounded with powers, which will carry our messages and be our slaves if we know how to command nature by obeying it, or will impassively strike us dead if we do not.

Again, in our physical life, as a rule, virtue makes strength, sin brings punishment. 'Riotous living' makes diseased bodies. Sins in the flesh are avenged in the flesh, and there is no need for a miracle to bring it about that he who sows to the flesh shall 'of the flesh reap corruption.' God entrusts the punishment of the breach of the laws of temperance and morality in the body to the 'natural' operation of such breach. The inevitable connection between sins against the body and disease in the body, is an instance of the way of the Lord—the same set of principles and facts—being strength to one man and destruction to another. Hundreds of young men in Manchester—some of whom are listening to me now, no doubt—are killing themselves, or at least are ruining their health, by flying in the face of the plain laws of purity and self-control. They think that they must 'have their fling,' and 'obey their instincts,' and so on. Well, if they must, then another 'must' will insist upon coming into play—and they must reap as they have sown, and drink as they have brewed, and the grim saying of this book about profligate young men will be fulfilled in many of them. 'His bones are full of the iniquity of his youth, which shall lie down with him in the grave.' Be not deceived, God is not mocked, and His way avenges bodily transgressions by bodily sufferings.

And then, in higher regions, on the whole, goodness makes blessedness, and evil brings ruin. All the powers of God's universe, and all the tenderness of God's heart are on the side of the man that does right. The stars

in their courses fight against the man that fights against Him; and on the other side, in yielding thyself to the will of God and following the dictates of His commandments, 'Thou shalt make a league with the beasts of the field, and the stones of the field shall be at peace with thee.' All things serve the soul that serves God, and all war against him who wars against his Maker. The way of the Lord cannot but further and help all who love and serve Him. For them all things must work together for good. By the very laws of God's own being, which necessarily shape all His actions, the whole 'stream of tendency without us makes for righteousness.' In the one course of life we go with the stream of divine activity which pours from the throne of God. In the other we are like men trying to row a boat *up* Niagara. All the rush of the mighty torrent will batter us back. Our work will be doomed to destruction, and ourselves to shame. For ever and ever to be good is to be well. An eternal truth lies in the facts that the same word 'good' means pleasant and right, and that sin and sorrow are both called 'evil.' All sin is self-inflicted sorrow, and every 'rogue is a roundabout fool.' So ask yourselves the question: 'Is my life in harmony with, or opposed to, these omnipotent laws which rule the whole field of life?'

Still further, this same fact of the two-fold aspect and operation of the one way of the Lord will be made yet more evident in the future. It becomes us to speak very reverently and reticently about the matter, but I can conceive it possible that the one manifestation of God in a future life may be in substance the same, and yet that it may produce opposite effects upon oppositely disposed souls. According to the old mystical illustra-

tion, the same heat that melts wax hardens clay, and the same apocalypse of the divine nature in another world may to one man be life and joy, and to another man may be terror and despair. I do not dwell upon that; it is far too awful a thing for us to speak about to one another, but it is worth your taking to heart when you are indulging in easy anticipations that of course God is merciful and will bless and save everybody after he dies. Perhaps—I do not go any further than a perhaps—perhaps God cannot, and perhaps if a man has got himself into such a condition as it is possible for a man to get into, perhaps, like light upon a diseased eye, the purest beam may be the most exquisite pain, and the natural instinct may be to ‘call upon the rocks and the hills to fall upon them’ and cover them up in a more genial darkness from that Face, to see which should be life and blessedness.

People speak of future rewards and punishments as if they were given and inflicted by simple and divine volition, and did not stand in any necessary connection with holiness on the one hand or with sin on the other. I do not deny that some portion of both bliss and sorrow may be of such a character. But there is a very important and wide region in which our actions here must automatically bring consequences hereafter of joy or sorrow, without any special retributive action of God’s.

We have only to keep in view one or two things about the future which we know to be true, and we shall see this. Suppose a man with his memory of all his past life perfect, and his conscience stimulated to greater sensitiveness and clearer judgment, and all opportunities ended of gratifying tastes and appetites, whose food is in this world, while yet the soul has

become dependent on them for ease and comfort. What more is needed to make a hell? And the supposition is but the statement of a fact. We seem to forget much; but when the waters are drained off all the lost things will be found at the bottom. Conscience gets dulled and sophisticated here. But the icy cold of death will wake it up, and the new position will give new insight into the true character of our actions. You see how often a man at the end of life has his eyes cleared to see his faults. But how much more will that be the case hereafter! When the rush of passion is past, and you are far enough from your life to view it as a whole, holding it at arm's length, you will see better what it looks like. There is nothing improbable in supposing that inclinations and tastes which have been nourished for a lifetime may survive the possibility of indulging them in another life, as they often do in this; and what can be worse than such a thirst for one drop of water, which never can be tasted more? These things are certain, and no more is needed to make sin produce, by necessary consequence, misery, and ruin; while similarly, goodness brings joy, peace, and blessing.

But again, the self-revelation of God has this same double aspect.

'The way of the Lord' may mean His process by which He reveals His character. Every truth concerning Him may be either a joy or a terror to men. All His 'attributes' are builded into 'a strong tower, into which the righteous runneth, and is safe,' or else they are builded into a prison and torture-house. So the thought of God may either be a happy and strengthening one, or an unwelcome one. 'I remembered God, and was troubled,' says one Psalmist. What an awful

confession—that the thought of God disturbed him! The thought of God to some of us is a very unwelcome one, as unwelcome as the thought of a detective to a company of thieves. Is not that dreadful? Music is a torture to some ears: and there are people who have so alienated their hearts and wills from God that the Name which should be ‘their dearest faith’ is not only their ‘ghastliest doubt,’ but their greatest pain. O brethren, the thought of God and all that wonderful complex of mighty attributes and beauties which make His Name should be our delight, the key to all treasures, the end of all sorrows, our light in darkness, our life in death, our all in all. It is either that to us, or it is something that we would fain forget. Which is it to you?

Especially the Gospel has this double aspect. Our text speaks of the distinction between the righteous and evil doers; but how to pass from the one class to the other, it does not tell us. The Gospel is the answer to that question. It tells us that though we are all ‘workers of iniquity,’ and must, therefore, if such a text as this were the last word to be spoken on the matter, share in the ruin which smites the opponent of the divine will, we may pass from that class; and by simple faith in Him who died on the Cross for all workers of iniquity, may become of those righteous on whose side God works in all His way, who have all His attributes drawn up like an embattled army in their defence, and have His mighty name for their refuge.

As the very crown of the ways of God, the work of Christ and the record of it in the Gospel have most eminently this double aspect. God meant nothing but the salvation of the whole world when He sent us this

Gospel His 'way' therein was pure, unmingled, universal love. We can make that great message untroubled blessing by simply accepting it. Nothing more is needed but to take God at His word, and to close with His sincere and earnest invitation. Then Christ's work becomes the fortress in which we are guarded from sin and guilt, from the arrows of conscience, and the fiery darts of temptation. But if not accepted, then it is not passive, it is not nothing. If rejected, it does more harm to a man than anything else can, just because, if accepted, it would have done him more good. The brighter the light, the darker the shadow. The pillar which symbolised the presence of God sent down influences on either side; to the trembling crowd of the Israelites on the one hand, to the pursuing ranks of the Egyptians on the other; and though the pillar was one, opposite effects streamed from it, and it was 'a cloud and darkness to them, but it gave light by night to these.' Everything depends on which side of the pillar you choose to see. The ark of God, which brought dismay and death among false gods and their worshippers, brought blessing into the humble house of Obed Edom, the man of Gath, with whom it rested for three months before it was set in its place in the city of David. That which is meant to be the savour of life unto life must either be that or the savour of death unto death.

Jesus Christ is *something* to each of us. For you who have heard His name ever since you were children, your relation to Him settles your condition and your prospects, and moulds your character. Either He is for you the tried corner-stone, the sure foundation, on which whosoever builds will not be confounded, or He is the stone of stumbling, against which whosoever

stumbles will be broken, and which will crush to powder whomsoever it falls upon. 'This Child is set for the rise' or for the fall of all who hear His name. He leaves no man at the level at which He found him, but either lifts him up nearer to God, and purity and joy, or sinks him into an ever-descending pit of darkening separation from all these. Which is He to you? Something He must be—your strength or your ruin. If you commit your souls to Him in humble faith, He will be your peace, your life, your Heaven. If you turn from His offered grace, He will be your pain, your death, your torture. 'What maketh Heaven, that maketh hell.' Which do you choose Him to be?

THE MANY-SIDED CONTRAST OF WISDOM AND FOLLY

'Whoso loveth instruction loveth knowledge: but he that hateth reproof is brutish. 2. A good man obtaineth favour of the Lord: but a man of wicked devices will he condemn. 3. A man shall not be established by wickedness; but the root of the righteous shall not be moved. 4. A virtuous woman is a crown to her husband: but she that maketh ashamed is as rottenness in his bones. 5. The thoughts of the righteous are right: but the counsels of the wicked are deceit. 6. The words of the wicked are to lie in wait for blood: but the mouth of the upright shall deliver them. 7. The wicked are overthrown, and are not: but the house of the righteous shall stand. 8. A man shall be commended according to his wisdom: but he that is of a perverse heart shall be despised. 9. He that is despised, and hath a servant, is better than he that honoureth himself, and lacketh bread. 10. A righteous man regardeth the life of his beast: but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel. 11. He that tilleth his land shall be satisfied with bread: but he that followeth vain persons is void of understanding. 12. The wicked desireth the net of evil men: but the root of the righteous yieldeth fruit. 13. The wicked is snared by the transgression of his lips: but the just shall come out of trouble. 14. A man shall be satisfied with good by the fruit of his mouth; and the recompence of a man's hands shall be rendered unto him. 15. The way of a fool is right in his own eyes: but he that hearkeneth unto counsel is wise.'—
PROVERBS xii. 1-15.

THE verses of the present passage are a specimen of the main body of the Book of Proverbs. They are not a building, but a heap. The stones seldom have any mortar between them, and connection or progress is for the most part sought in vain. But one great anti-

thesis runs through the whole—the contrast of wisdom or righteousness with folly or wickedness. The compiler or author is never weary of setting out that opposition in all possible lights. It is, in his view, the one difference worth noting between men, and it determines their whole character and fortunes. The book traverses with keen observation all the realm of life, and everywhere finds confirmation of its great principle that goodness is wisdom and sin folly.

There is something extremely impressive in this continual reiteration of that contrast. As we read, we feel as if, after all, there were nothing in the world but it and its results. That profound sense of the existence and far-reaching scope of the division of men into two classes is not the least of the benefits which a thoughtful study of Proverbs brings to us. In this lesson it is useless to attempt to classify the verses. Slight traces of grouping appear here and there; but, on the whole, we have a set of miscellaneous aphorisms turning on the great contrast, and setting in various lights the characters and fates of the righteous and the wicked.

The first mark of difference is the opposite feeling about discipline. If a man is wise, he will love 'knowledge'; and if he loves knowledge, he will love the means to it, and therefore will not kick against correction. That is another view of trials from the one which inculcates devout submission to a Father. It regards only the benefits to ourselves. If we want to be taught anything, we shall not flinch from the rod. There must be pains undergone in order to win knowledge of any sort, and the man who rebels against these shows that he had rather be comfortable and ignorant than wise. A pupil who will not stand

having his exercises corrected will not learn his faults. On the other hand, hating reproof is 'brutish' in the most literal sense; for it is the characteristic of animals that they do not understand the purpose of pain, and never advance because they do not. Men can grow because they can submit to discipline; beasts cannot improve because, except partially and in a few cases, they cannot accept correction.

The first proverb deals with wisdom or goodness in its inner source; namely, a docile disposition. The two next deal with its consequences. It secures God's favour, while its opposite is condemned; and then, as a consequence of this, the good man is established and the wicked swept away. The manifestations of God's favour and its opposite are not to be thrown forward to a future life. Continuously the sunshine of divine love falls on the one man, and already the other is condemned. It needs some strength of faith to look through the shows of prosperity often attending plain wickedness, and believe that it is always a blunder to do wrong.

But a moderate experience of life will supply many instances of prosperous villainy in trade and politics which melted away like mist. The shore is strewn with wrecks, dashed to pieces because righteousness did not steer. Every exchange gives examples in plenty. How many seemingly solid structures built on wrong every man has seen in his lifetime crumble like the cloud masses which the wind piles in the sky and then dissipates! The root of the righteous is in God, and therefore he is firm. The contrast is like that of Psalm i.—between the tree with strong roots and waving greenery, and the chaff, rootless, and therefore whirled out of the threshing-floor.

The universal contrast is next applied to women; and in accordance with the subordinate position they held in old days, the bearing of her goodness is principally regarded as affecting her husband. That does not cover the whole ground, of course. But wherever there is a true marriage, the wife will not think that woman's rights are infringed because one chief issue of her beauty of virtue is the honour and joy it reflects upon him who has her heart. 'A virtuous woman' is not only one who possesses the one virtue to which the phrase has been so miserably confined, but who is 'a woman of strength'—no doll or plaything, but

'A perfect woman, nobly planned
To warn, to comfort, and command.'

The gnawing misery of being fastened like two dogs in a leash to one who 'causes shame' is vividly portrayed by that strong figure, that she is like 'rotteness in his bones,' eating away strength, and inflicting disfigurement and torture.

Then come a pair of verses describing the inward and outward work of the two kinds of men as these affect others. The former verses dealt with their effects on the actors; the present, with their bearing on others. Inwardly, the good man has thoughts which scrupulously keep the balance true and are just to his fellows, while the wicked plans to deceive for his own profit. When thoughts are translated into speech, deceit bears fruit in words which are like ambushes of murderers, laying traps to destroy, while the righteous man's words are like angels of deliverance to the unsuspecting who are ready to fall into the snare. Selfishness, which is the root of wickedness, will be cruelty and injustice when necessary for its ends. The man who is

wise because God is his centre and aim will be merciful and helpful. The basis of philanthropy is religion. The solemn importance attached to speech is observable. Words can slay as truly as swords. Now that the press has multiplied the power of speech, and the world is buzzing with the clatter of tongues, we all need to lay to heart the responsibilities and magic power of spoken and printed words, and 'to set a watch on the door of our lips.'

Then follow a couple of verses dealing with the consequences to men themselves of their contrasted characters. The first of these (verse 7) recurs to the thought of verse 3, but with a difference. Not only the righteous himself, but his house, shall be established. The solidarity of the family and the entail of goodness are strongly insisted on in the Old Testament, though limitations are fully recognised. If a good man's son continues his father's character, he will prolong his father's blessings; and in normal conditions, a parent's wisdom passes on to his children. Something is wrong when, as is so often the case, it does not; and it is not always the children's fault.

The overthrow of the wicked is set in striking contrast with their plots to overthrow others. Their mischief comes back, like an Australian boomerang, to the hand that flings it; and contrariwise, delivering others is a sure way of establishing one's self. Exceptions there are, for the world-scheme is too complicated to be condensed into a formula; but all proverbs speak of the average usual results of virtue and vice, and those of this book do the same. Verse 8 asserts that, on the whole, honour attends goodness, and contempt wickedness. Of course, companions in dissipation extol each other's vices, and launch the old

threadbare sneers at goodness. But if wisdom were not set uppermost in men's secret judgment, there would be no hypocrites, and their existence proves the truth of the proverb.

Verse 9 seems suggested by 'despised' in verse 8. There are two kinds of contempt—one which brands sin deservedly, one which vulgarly despises everybody who is not rich. A man need not mind, though his modest household is treated with contempt, if quiet righteousness reigns in it. It is better to be contented with little, and humble in a lowly place, than to be proud and hungry, as many were in the writer's time and since. A foolish world set on wealth may despise, but its contempt breaks no bones. Self-conceit is poor diet.

This seems to be the first of a little cluster of proverbs bearing on domestic life. It prefers modest mediocrity of station, such as Agur desired. Its successor shows how the contrasted qualities come out in the two men's relation to their domestic animals. Goodness sweeps a wide circle touching the throne of God and the stall of the cattle. It was not Coleridge who found out that 'He prayeth best who loveth best,' but this old proverb-maker; and he could speak the thought without the poet's exaggeration, which robs his expression of it of half its value. The original says 'knoweth the soul,' which may indeed mean, 'regardeth the life,' but rather seems to suggest sympathetic interest in leading to an understanding of the dumb creature, which must precede all wise care for its well-being. It is a part of religion to try to enter into the mysterious feelings of our humble dependants in farmyard and stable. On the other hand, for want of such sympathetic interest, even when the

'wicked' means to be kind, he does harm; or the word rendered 'tender mercies' may here mean the feelings (literally, 'bowels') which, in their intense selfishness, are cruel even to animals.

Verse 11 has no connection with the preceding, unless the link is common reference to home life and business. It contrasts the sure results of honest industry with the folly of speculation. The Revised Version margin 'vain things' is better than the text 'vain persons,' which would give no antithesis to the patient tilling of the first clause. That verse would make an admirable motto to be stretched across the Stock Exchange, and like places on both sides of the Atlantic. How many ruined homes and heart-broken wives witness in America and England to its truth! The vulgar English proverb, 'What comes over the Devil's back goes under his belly,' says the same thing. The only way to get honest wealth is to work for it. Gambling in all its forms is rank folly.

So the next proverb (verse 12) continues the same thought, and puts it in a somewhat difficult phrase. It goes a little deeper than the former, showing that the covetousness which follows after vain things, is really wicked lusting for unrighteous gain. 'The net of evil-doers' is better taken as in the margin (Rev. Ver.) 'prey' or 'spoil,' and the meaning seems to be as just stated. Such hankering for riches, no matter how obtained, or such envying of the booty which admittedly has been won by roguery, is a mark of the wicked. How many professing church members have known that feeling in thinking of the millions of some railway king! Would they like the proverb to be applied to them?

The contrast to this is 'the root of the righteous

yields fruit,' or 'shoots forth,' We have heard (verse 3) that it shall never be moved, being fixed in God; now we are told that it will produce all that is needful. A life rooted in God will unfold into all necessary good, which will be better than the spoil of the wicked. There are two ways of getting on—to struggle and fight and trample down rivals; one, to keep near God and wait for him. 'Ye fight and war; ye have not, because ye ask not.'

The next two proverbs have in common a reference to the effect of speech upon the speaker. 'In the transgression of the lips is an evil snare'; that is, sinful words ensnare their utterer, and whoever else he harms, he himself is harmed most. The reflex influence on character of our utterances is not present to us, as it should be. They leave stains on lips and heart. Thoughts expressed are more definite and permanent thereby. A vicious thought clothed in speech has new power over the speaker. If we would escape from that danger, we must *be* righteous, and *speak* righteousness; and then the same cause will deepen our convictions of 'whatsoever things are lovely and of good report.'

Verse 14 insists on this opposite side of the truth. Good words will bring forth fruit, which will satisfy the speaker, because, whatever effects his words may have on others, they will leave strengthened goodness and love of it in himself. 'If the house be worthy, your peace shall rest upon it; if not, it shall return to you again.' That reaction of words on oneself is but one case of the universal law of consequences coming back on us. We are the architects of our own destinies. Every deed has an immortal life, and returns, either like a raven or a dove, to the man who sent it out on its flight. It comes back either croaking with blood on its

beak, or cooing with an olive branch in its mouth. All life is at once sowing and reaping. A harvest comes in which retribution will be even more entire and accurate.

The last proverb of the passage gives a familiar antithesis, and partially returns to the thought of verse 1. The fool has no standard of conduct but his own notions, and is absurdly complacent as to all his doings. The wise seeks better guidance than his own, and is docile, because he is not so ridiculously sure of his infallibility. No type of weak wickedness is more abominable to the proverbialist than that of pert self-conceit, which knows so little that it thinks it knows everything, and is 'as untameable as a fly.' But in the wisest sense, it is true that a mark of folly is self-opinionativeness; that a man who has himself for teacher has a fool for scholar; that the test of wisdom is willingness to be taught; and, especially, that to bring a docile, humble spirit to the Source of all wisdom, and to ask counsel of God, is the beginning of true insight, and that the self-sufficiency which is the essence of sin, is never more fatal than when it is ignorant of guilt, and therefore spurns a Saviour.

THE POOR RICH AND THE RICH POOR

'There is that maketh himself rich, yet hath nothing: there is that maketh himself poor, yet hath great riches.'—PROVERBS xiii. 7.

Two singularly-contrasted characters are set in opposition here. One, that of a man who lives like a millionaire and is a pauper; another, that of a man who lives like a pauper and is rich. The latter character, that of a man who hides and hoards his wealth, was, perhaps, more common in the days when this

collection of Proverbs was put together, because in all ill-governed countries, to show wealth is a short way to get rid of it. But they have their modern representatives. We who live in a commercial community have seen many a blown-out bubble soaring and glittering, and then collapsing into a drop of soap-suds, and on the other hand, we are always hearing of notes and bank-books being found stowed away in some wretched hovel where a miser has died.

Now, I do not suppose that the author of this proverb attached any kind of moral to it in his own mind. It is simply a jotting of an observation drawn from a wide experience; and if he meant to teach any lesson by it, I suppose it was nothing more than that in regard to money, as to other things, we should avoid extremes, and should try to show what we are, and to be what we seem. But whilst thus I do not take it that there is any kind of moral or religious lesson in the writer's mind, I may venture, perhaps, to take this saying as being a picturesque illustration, putting in vivid fashion certain great truths which apply in all regions of life, and which find their highest application in regard to Christianity, and our relation to Jesus Christ. There, too, 'there is that maketh himself rich, and yet hath nothing; and there is that maketh himself poor, and yet'—or one might, perhaps, say *therefore*—'hath great riches.' It is from that point of view that I wish to look at the words at this time. I must begin with recalling to your mind,

I. Our universal poverty.

Whatever a man may think about himself, however he may estimate himself and conceit himself, there stand out two salient facts, the fact of universal dependence, and the fact of universal sinfulness, which

ought to bear into every heart the consciousness of this poverty. A word or two about each of these two facts.

First, the fact of universal dependence. Now, wise men and deep thinkers have found a very hard problem in the question of how it is possible that there should be an infinite God and a finite universe standing, as it were, over against Him. I am not going to trouble you with the all-but-just-succeeding answers to that great problem which the various systems of thinking have given. These lie apart from my present purpose. But what I would point out is that, whatever else may be dark and difficult about the co-existence of these two, the infinite God and the finite universe, this at least is sun-clear, that the creature depends absolutely for everything on that infinite Creator. People talk sometimes, and we are all too apt to think, as if God had made the world and left it. And we are all too apt to think that, however we may owe the origination of our own personal existence to a divine act, the act was done when we began to be, and the life was given as a gift that could be separated from the Bestower. But that is not the state of the case at all. The real fact is that life is only continued because of the continued operation on every living thing, just as being is only continued by reason of the continued operation on every existing thing, of the Divine Power. 'In Him we live,' and the life is the result of the perpetual impartation from Himself 'in whom all things consist,' according to the profound word of the Apostle. Their being depends on their union with Him. If it were possible to cut a sunbeam in two, so that the further half of it should be separated from its vital union with the great central fire from which it rushed long, long

ago, that further half would pale into darkness. And if you cut the connection between God and the creature, the creature shrivels into nothing. By Him the spring buds around us unfold themselves; by Him all things are. So, at the very foundation of our being there lies absolute dependence.

In like manner, all that we call faculties, capacities, and the like, are, in a far deeper sense than the conventional use of the word 'gift' implies, bestowments from Him. The Old Testament goes to the root of the matter when, speaking of the artistic and æsthetic skill of the workers in the fine arts in the Tabernacle, it says, 'the Spirit of the Lord' taught Bezaleel; and when, even in regard to the brute strength of Samson—surely the strangest hero of faith that ever existed—it says that when 'the Spirit of the Lord came upon him,' into his giant hands there was infused the strength by which he tore the lion's jaws asunder. In like manner, all the faculties that men possess they have simply because He has given them. 'What hast thou that thou hast not received? If thou hast received, why dost thou boast thyself?' So there is a great psalm that gathers everything that makes up human life, and traces it all to God, when it says, 'They shall be abundantly satisfied with the fatness of Thy house,' for from God comes all that sustains us; 'Thou shalt make them drink of the river of Thy pleasures,' for from God comes all that gladdens us; 'with Thee is the fountain of life,' for from Him flow all the tiny streams that make the life of all that live; 'in Thy light shall we see light,' for every power of perceiving, and all grace and lustre of purity, owe their source to Him. As well, then, might the pitcher boast itself of the sparkling water that it only holds,

as well might the earthen jar plume itself on the treasure that has been deposited in it, as we make ourselves rich because of the riches that we have received. 'Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his strength. Let not the rich man glory in his riches; but he that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.'

Then, turn for a moment to the second of the facts on which this universal poverty depends, and that is the fact of universal sinfulness. Ah! there is one thing that is our own—

'If any power we have, it is to will.'

We have that strange faculty, which nobody has ever thoroughly explained yet, but which we all know to exist, of wrenching ourselves so far away from God, 'in whom we live and move and have our being,' that we can make our thoughts and ways, not merely lower than, but contradictory of, and antagonistic to, His thoughts, and His ways. Conscience tells us, and we all know it, that we are the causes of our own actions, though from Him come the powers by which we do them. The electricity comes from the central power-station, but it depends on us what sort of wheels we make it drive, and what kind of work we set it to do. Make all allowances you like for circumstances—what they call nowadays 'environment,' by which formidable word some people seem to think that they have explained away a great many difficulties—make all allowances you like for inheritance—what they now call 'heredity,' by which other magic word people seem to think that they may largely obliterate the sense of responsibility and sin—allow as much as you like, in reason, for these, and there remains the indestructible

consciousness in every man, 'I did it, and it was my fault that I did it; and the moral guilt remains.'

So, then, there are these two things, universal dependence and universal sinfulness, and on them is built the declaration of universal poverty. Duty is debt. Everybody knows that the two words come from the same root. What we ought is what we owe. We all owe an obedience which none of us has rendered. Ten thousand talents is the debt and—'they had nothing to pay.' We are like bankrupts that begin business with a borrowed capital, by reason of our absolute dependence; and so manage their concerns as to find themselves inextricably entangled in a labyrinth of obligations which they cannot discharge. We are all paupers. And so I come to the second point, and that is—

II. The poor rich man.

'There is that maketh himself rich, and yet hath nothing.' That describes accurately the type of man of whom there are thousands; of whom there are dozens listening to me at this moment; who ignores dependence and is not conscious of sin, and so struts about in self-complacent satisfaction with himself, and knows nothing of his true condition. There is nothing more tragic—and so it would be seen to be if it were not so common—than that a man, laden, as we each of us are, with a burden of evil that we cannot get rid of, should yet conceit himself to possess merits, virtues, graces, that ought to secure for him the admiration of his fellows, or, at least, to exempt him from their censure, and which he thinks, when he thinks about it at all, may perhaps secure for him the approbation of God. 'The deceitfulness of sin' is one of its mightiest powers. There is nothing that so blinds a man to the real moral character of actions as that obstinate self-com-

placency which approves of a thing because it is mine. You condemn in other people the very things you do yourself. You see all their ugliness in them; you do not recognise it when it is your deed. Many of you have never ventured upon a careful examination and appraisement of your own moral and religious character. You durst not, for you are afraid that it would turn out badly. So, like some insolvent who has not the courage to face the facts, you take refuge in defective bookkeeping, and think that that is as good as being solvent. Then you have far too low a standard, and one of the main reasons why you have so low a standard is just because the sins that you do have dulled your consciences, and like the Styrian peasants that eat arsenic, the poison does not poison you, and you do not feel yourself any the worse for it. Dear brethren! these are very rude things for me to say to you. I am saying them to myself as much as to you, and I would to God that you would listen to them, not because I say them, but because they are true. The great bulk of us know our own moral characters just as little as we know the sound of our own voices. I suppose if you could hear yourself speak you would say, 'I never knew that my voice sounded like that.' And I am quite sure that many of you, if the curtain could be drawn aside which is largely woven out of the black yarn of your own evil thoughts, and you could see yourselves as in a mirror, you would say, 'I had no notion that I looked like that.' 'There is that maketh himself rich, and yet hath nothing.'

Ay! and more than that. The making of yourself rich is the sure way to prevent yourself from ever being so. We see that in all other regions of life. If a student

says to himself, 'Oh! I know all that subject,' the chances are that he will not get it up any more; and the further chance is that he will be 'ploughed' when the examination-day comes. If the artist stands before the picture, and says to himself, 'Well done, that is the realisation of my ideal!' he will paint no more anything worth looking at. And in any department, when a man says 'Lo! I have attained,' then he ceases to advance.

Now, bring all that to bear upon religion, upon Christ and His salvation, upon our own spiritual and religious and moral condition. The sense of imperfection is the salt of approximation to perfection. And the man that says 'I am rich' is condemning himself to poverty and pauperism. If you do not know your need, you will not go to look for the supply of it. If you fancy yourselves to be quite well, though a mortal disease has gripped you, you will take no medicine, nor have recourse to any physician. If you think that you have enough good to show for man's judgment and for God's, and have not been convinced of your dependence and your sinfulness, then Jesus Christ will be very little to you, and His great work as the Redeemer and Saviour of His people from their sins will be nothing to you. And so you will condemn yourselves to have nothing unto the very end.

I believe that this generation needs few things more than it needs a deepened consciousness of the reality of sin and of the depth and damnable nature of it. It is because people feel so little of the burden of their transgression that they care so little for that gentle Hand that lifts away their burden. It is because from much of popular religion—and, alas! that I should have to say it, from much of popular preach-

ing—there has vanished the deep wholesome sense of poverty, that, from so much of popular religion, and preaching too, there has faded away the central light of the Gospel, the proclamation of the Cross by which is taken away the sin of the whole world.

So, lastly, my text brings before us—

III. The rich poor man.

‘There is that maketh himself poor and yet’—or, as varied, the expression is, ‘therefore hath great riches.’ Jesus Christ has lifted the thoughts in my text into the very region into which I am trying to bring them, when in the first of all the Beatitudes, as they are called, ‘He opened His mouth and said, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.’ Poor, and therefore an owner of a kingdom! Now I need not, at this stage of my sermon, insist upon the fact that that consciousness of poverty is the only fitting attitude for any of us to take up in view of the two facts with which I started, the fact of our dependence and the fact of our sinfulness. What absurdity it seems for a man about whom these two things are true, that, as I said, he began with a borrowed capital, and has only incurred greater debts in his transactions, there should be any foothold left in his own estimation on which he can stand and claim to be anything but the pauper that he is. Oh! brethren, of all the hallucinations that we put upon ourselves in trying to believe that things are as we wish, there is none more subtle, more obstinate, more deeply dangerous than this, that a man full of evil should be so ignorant of his evil as to say, like that Pharisee in our Lord’s parable, ‘I thank Thee that I am not as other men are. I give tithes . . . I pray . . . I am this, that, and the other thing; not like that wretched

publican over there.' Yes, this is the fit attitude for us, — 'He would not so much as lift up his eyes to heaven.'

Then let me remind you that this wholesome recognition of facts about ourselves as they are is the sure way to possess the wealth. Of course, it is possible for a man by some mighty influence or other brought to bear upon him, to see himself as God sees him, and then, if there is nothing more than that, he is tortured with 'the sorrow that worketh death.' Judas 'went out and hanged himself'; Peter 'went out and wept bitterly.' The one was sent 'to his own place,' wherever that was; the other was sent foremost of the Twelve. If you see your poverty, let self-distrust be the nadir, the lowest point, and let faith be the complementary high point, the zenith. The rebound from self-distrust to trust in Christ is that which makes the consciousness of poverty the condition of receiving wealth.

And what wealth it is!—the wealth of a peaceful conscience, of a quiet heart, of lofty aims, of a pure mind, of strength according to our need, of an immortal hope, of a treasure in the heavens that faileth not, 'where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt; where thieves do not break through nor steal.' Blessed be God! the more we have the riches of glory in Christ Jesus, the more shall we feel that we have nothing, and that all is His, and none of it ours. And so, as the rivers run in the valleys, and the high mountain-tops are dry and barren, the grace which makes us rich will run in the low ground of our conscious humiliation and nothingness.

Dear brother! do you estimate yourself as you are? Have you taken stock of yourself? Have you got away from the hallucination of possessing wealth? Has your sense of need led you to cease from trust in

yourself, and to put all your trust in Jesus Christ? Have you taken the wealth which He freely gives to all who sue *in formâ pauperis*? He does not ask you to bring anything but debts and sins, emptiness and weakness, and penitent faith. He will strengthen the weakness, fill the emptiness, forgive the sins, cancel the debts, and make you 'rich toward God.' I beseech you to listen to Him, speaking from heaven, and taking up the strain of this text: 'Because thou sayest I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked, I counsel thee to buy of Me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich.' And then you will be of those blessed poor ones who are 'rich through faith, and heirs of the Kingdom.'

THE TILLAGE OF THE POOR

Much food is in the tillage of the poor.'—PROVERBS xiii. 23.

PALESTINE was a land of small peasant proprietors, and the institution of the Jubilee was intended to prevent the acquisition of large estates by any Israelite. The consequence, as intended, was a level of modest prosperity. It was 'the tillage of the poor,' the careful, diligent husbandry of the man who had only a little patch of land to look after, that filled the storehouses of the Holy Land. Hence the proverb of our text arose. It preserves the picture of the economical conditions in which it originated, and it is capable of, and is intended to have, an application to all forms and fields of work. In all it is true that the bulk of the harvested results are due, not to the large labours of the few, but to the minute, unnoticed toils of the

many. Small service is true service, and the aggregate of such produces large crops. Spade husbandry gets most out of the ground. The labourer's allotment of half an acre is generally more prolific than the average of the squire's estate. Much may be made of slender gifts, small resources, and limited opportunities if carefully cultivated, as they should be, and as their very slenderness should stimulate their being.

One of the psalms accuses 'the children of Ephraim' because, 'being armed and carrying bows, they turned back in the day of battle.' That saying deduces obligation from equipment, and preaches a stringent code of duty to those who are in any direction largely gifted. Power to its last particle is duty, and not small is the crime of those who, with great capacities, have small desire to use them, and leave the brunt of the battle to half-trained soldiers, badly armed.

But the imagery of the fight is not sufficient to include all aspects of Christian effort. The peaceful toil of the 'husbandman that labours' stands, in one of Paul's letters, side by side with the heroism of the 'man that warreth.' Our text gives us the former image, and so supplements that other.

It completes the lesson of the psalm in another respect, as insisting on the importance, not of the well endowed, but of the slenderly furnished, who are immensely in the majority. This text is a message to ordinary, mediocre people, without much ability or influence.

I. It teaches, first, the responsibility of small gifts.

It is no mere accident that in our Lord's great parable He represents the man with the *one* talent as the hider of his gift. There is a certain pleasure in doing what we can do, or fancy we can do, well.

There is a certain pleasure in the exercise of any kind of gift, be it of body or mind; but when we know that we are but very slightly gifted by Him, there is a temptation to say, 'Oh! it does not matter much whether I contribute my share to this, that, or the other work or no. I am but a poor man. My half-crown will make but a small difference in the total. I am possessed of very little leisure. The few minutes that I can spare for individual cultivation, or for benevolent work, will not matter at all. I am only an insignificant unit; nobody pays any attention to my opinion. It does not in the least signify whether I make my influence felt in regard of social, religious, or political questions, and the like. I can leave all that to the more influential men. My littleness at least has the prerogative of immunity. My little finger would produce such a slight impact on the scale that it is indifferent whether I apply it or not. It is a good deal easier for me to wrap up my talent—which, after all, is only a threepenny bit, and not a talent—and put it away and do nothing.'

Yes, but then you forget, dear friend! that responsibility does not diminish with the size of the gifts, but that there is as great responsibility for the use of the smallest as for the use of the largest, and that although it does not matter very much to anybody but yourself what you do, it matters all the world to you.

But then, besides that, my text tells us that it does matter whether the poor man sets himself to make the most of his little patch of ground or not. 'There is much food in the tillage of the poor.' The slenderly endowed are the immense majority. There is a genius or two here and there, dotted along the line of the

world's and the Church's history. The great men and wise men and mighty men and wealthy men may be counted by units, but the men that are not very much of anything are to be counted by millions. And unless we can find some stringent law of responsibility that applies to them, the bulk of the human race will be under no obligation to do anything either for God or for their fellows, or for themselves. If I am absolved from the task of bringing my weight to bear on the side of right because my weight is infinitesimal, and I am only one in a million, suppose all the million were to plead the same excuse; what then? Then there would not be any weight on the side of the right at all. The barns in Palestine were not filled by farming on a great scale like that pursued away out on the western prairies, where one man will own, and his servants will plough a furrow for miles long, but they were filled by the small industries of the owners of tiny patches.

The 'tillage of the poor,' meaning thereby not the mendicant, but the peasant owner of a little plot, yielded the bulk of the 'food.' The wholesome old proverb, 'many littles make a mickle,' is as true about the influence brought to bear in the world to arrest evil and to sweeten corruption as it is about anything besides. Christ has a great deal more need of the cultivation of the small patches that He gives to the most of us than He has even of the cultivation of the large estates that He bestows on a few. Responsibility is not to be measured by amount of gift, but is equally stringent, entire, and absolute whatsoever be the magnitude of the endowments from which it arises.

Let me remind you, too, how the same virtues and

excellences can be practised in the administering of the smallest as in that of the greatest gifts. Men say—I dare say some of you have said—‘Oh! if I were eloquent like So-and-so; rich like somebody else; a man of weight and importance like some other, how I would consecrate my powers to the Master!’ But I am slow of speech, or nobody minds me, or I have but very little that I can give.’ Yes! ‘He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much.’ If you do not utilise the capacity possessed, to increase the estate would only be to increase the crop of weeds from its uncultivated clods. We never palm off a greater deception on ourselves than when we try to hoodwink conscience by pleading bounded gifts as an excuse for boundless indolence, and to persuade ourselves that if we could do more we should be less inclined to do nothing. The most largely endowed has no more obligation and no fairer field than the most slenderly gifted lies under and possesses.

All service coming from the same motive and tending to the same end is the same with God. Not the magnitude of the act, but the motive thereof, determines the whole character of the life of which it is a part. The same graces of obedience, consecration, quick sympathy, self-denying effort may be cultivated and manifested in the spending of a halfpenny as in the administration of millions. The smallest rainbow in the tiniest drop that hangs from some sooty eave and catches the sunlight has precisely the same lines, in the same order, as the great arch that strides across half the sky. If you go to the Giant’s Causeway, or to the other end of it amongst the Scotch Hebrides, you will find the hexagonal basaltic pillars all of identically the same pattern and shape, whether their height be

measured by feet or by tenths of an inch. Big or little, they obey exactly the same law. There is 'much food in the tillage of the poor.'

II. But now, note, again, how there must be a diligent cultivation of the small gifts.

The inventor of this proverb had looked carefully and sympathetically at the way in which the little peasant proprietors worked; and he saw in that a pattern for all life. It is not always the case, of course, that a little holding means good husbandry, but it is generally so; and you will find few waste corners and few unweeded patches on the ground of a man whose whole ground is measured by rods instead of by miles. There will usually be little waste time, and few neglected opportunities of working in the case of the peasant whose subsistence, with that of his family, depends on the diligent and wise cropping of the little patch that does belong to him.

And so, dear brethren! if you and I have to take our place in the ranks of the one-talented men, the commonplace run of ordinary people, the more reason for us to enlarge our gifts by a sedulous diligence, by an unwearied perseverance, by a keen look-out for all opportunities of service, and above all by a prayerful dependence upon Him from whom alone comes the power to toil, and who alone gives the increase. The less we are conscious of large gifts the more we should be bowed in dependence on Him from whom cometh 'every good and perfect gift'; and who gives according to His wisdom; and the more earnestly should we use that slender possession which God may have given us. Industry applied to small natural capacity will do far more than larger power rusted away by sloth. You all know that it is so in regard of daily life, and

common business, and the acquisition of mundane sciences and arts. It is just as true in regard to the Christian race, and to the Christian Church's work of witness.

Who are they who have done the most in this world for God and for men? The largely endowed men? 'Not many wise, not many mighty, not many noble are called.' The coral insect is microscopic, but it will build up from the profoundest depth of the ocean a reef against which the whole Pacific may dash in vain. It is the small gifts that, after all, are the important ones. So let us cultivate them the more earnestly the more humbly we think of our own capacity. 'Play well thy part; there all the honour lies.' God, who has builded up some of the towering Alps out of mica-flakes, builds up His Church out of infinitesimally small particles—slenderly endowed men touched by the consecration of His love.

III. Lastly, let me remind you of the harvest reaped from these slender gifts when sedulously tilled.

Two great results of such conscientious cultivation and use of small resources and opportunities may be suggested as included in that abundant 'food' of which the text speaks.

The faithfully used faculty increases. 'To him that hath shall be given.' 'Oh! if I had a wider sphere how I would flame in it, and fill it!' Then twinkle your best in your little sphere, and that will bring a wider one some time or other. For, as a rule, and in the general, though with exceptions, opportunities come to the man that can use them; and roughly, but yet substantially, men are set in this world where they can shine to the most advantage to God. Fill your place; and if you, like Paul, have borne witness for

the Master in little Jerusalem, He will not keep you there, but carry you to bear witness for Him in imperial Rome itself.

The old fable of the man who told his children to dig all over the field and they would find treasure, has its true application in regard to Christian effort and faithful stewardship of the gifts bestowed upon us. The sons found no gold, but they improved the field, and secured its bearing golden harvests, and they strengthened their own muscles, which was better than gold. So if we want larger endowments let us honestly use what we possess, and use will make growth.

The other issue, about which I need not say more than a word, is that the final reward of all faithful service—'Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord' is said, not to the brilliant, but to the 'faithful' servant. In that great parable, which is the very text-book of this whole subject of gifts and responsibilities and recompense, the men who were entrusted with unequal sums used these unequal sums with equal diligence, as is manifest by the fact that they realised an equal rate of increase. He that got two talents made two more out of them, and he that had five did no more; for he, too, but doubled his capital. So, because the poorer servant with his two, and the richer with his ten, had equally cultivated their diversely-measured estates, they were identical in reward; and to each of them the same thing is said: 'Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.' It matters little whether we copy some great picture upon a canvas as big as the side of a house, or upon a thumb-nail; the main thing is that we copy it. If we truly employ whatsoever gifts God has given to us, then we shall be accepted according to that we have, and not according to that we have not.

SIN THE MOCKER

'Fools make a mock at sin: but among the righteous there is favour. —
PROVERBS xiv. 9.

THE wisdom of this Book of Proverbs is not simply intellectual, but it has its roots in reverence and obedience to God, and for its accompaniment, righteousness. The wise man is the good man and the good man is the godly man. And as is wisdom, so its opposite, folly, is not only intellectual feebleness—the bad man is a fool, and the godless is a bad man. The greatest amount of brain-power cultivated to the highest degree does not make a man wise, and about many a student and thinker God pronounces the sentence 'Thou fool!'

That does not mean that all sin is ignorance, as we sometimes hear it said with a great show of tolerant profundity. There is some ignorance in all sin, but the essence of sin is the aversion of the will from a law and from a Person, not the defect of the understanding. So far from all sin being but ignorance, and therefore blameless, there is no sin without knowledge, and the measure of ignorance is the measure of blamelessness; unless the ignorance be itself, as it often is, criminal. Ignorance is one thing, folly is another.

One more remark by way of introduction must be made on the language of our text. The margin of the Revised Version correctly turns it completely round, and for 'the foolish make a mock at guilt,' would read, 'guilt mocketh at the foolish.' In the original the verb in our text is in the singular, and the only singular noun to go with it is 'guilt.' The thought then here is, that sin tempts men into its clutches, and then gibes and taunts them. It is a solemn and painful subject, but perhaps this text rightly pondered may help to

save some of us from hearing the mocking laugh which echoes through the empty chambers of many an empty soul.

I. Sin mocks us by its broken promises.

The object immediately sought by any wrong act may be attained. In sins of sense, the appetite is gratified; in other sins, the desire that urged to them attains its end. But what then? The temptation lay in the imagination that, the wrong thing being done, an inward good would result, and it does not; for even if the immediate object be secured, other results, all unforeseen, force themselves on us which spoil the hoped for good. The sickle cuts down tares as well as wheat, and the reaper's hands are filled with poisonous growths as well as with corn. There is a revulsion of feeling from the thing that before the sin was done attracted. The hideous story of the sin of David's son, Amnon, puts in ugliest shape the universal experience of men who are tempted to sin and are victims of the revulsion that follows—He 'hated her exceedingly, so that the hatred wherewith he hated her was greater than the love wherewith he had loved her.' Conscience, which was overpowered and unheard amid the loud cries of desire, speaks. We find out the narrow limits of satisfaction. The satisfied appetite has no further driving power, but lies down to sleep off its debauch, and ceases to be a factor for the time. Inward discord, the schism between duty and inclination, sets up strife in the very sanctuary of the soul. We are dimly conscious of the evil done as robbing us of power to do right. We cannot pray, and would be glad to forget God. And a self thus racked, impoverished, and weakened, is what a man gains by the sin that promised him so much and hid so much from him.

Or if these consequences are in any measure silenced and stifled, a still more melancholy mockery betrays him, in the continuance of the illusion that he is happy and all is well, when all the while he is driving head-long to destruction. Many a man orders his life so that it is like a ship that sails with huzzas and bedizened with flags while a favouring breeze fills its sails, but comes back to port battered and all but waterlogged, with its canvas 'lean, rent, and beggared by the strumpet wind.' It is always a mistake to try to buy happiness by doing wrong. The price is rigorously demanded, but the *quid pro quo* is not given, or if it seems to be so, there is something else given too, which takes all the savour out of the composite whole. The 'Folly' of the earlier half of this book woos men by her sweet invitations, and promises the sweetness of stolen waters and the pleasantness of bread eaten in secret, but she hides the fact, which the listener to her seducing voice has to find out for himself after he has drunk of the stolen waters and tasted the maddening pleasantness of her bread eaten in secret, that 'her guests are in the depths of Sheol.' The temptations that seek to win us to do wrong and dazzle us by fair visions are but 'juggling fiends that keep the word of promise to the ear, and break it to the hope.'

II. Sin mocks fools by making them its slaves.

There is not only a revulsion of feeling from the evil thing done that was so tempting before, but there is a dreadful change in the voice of the temptress. Before her victim had done the sin, she whispered hints of how little a thing it was. 'Don't make such a mountain of a molehill. It is a very small matter. You can easily give it up when you like.' But when the deed is done, then her mocking laugh rings out, 'I have got

you now and you cannot get away.' The prey is seduced into the trap by a carefully prepared bait, and as soon as its hesitating foot steps on to the slippery floor, down falls the door and escape is impossible. We are tempted to sin by the delusion that we are shaking off restraints that fetter our manhood, and that it is spirited to do as we like, and as soon as we have sinned we discover that we were pleasing not ourselves but a taskmaster, and that while the voice said, 'Show yourself a man, beyond these petty, old-fashioned maxims'; the meaning of it was, 'Become my slave.'

Sin grows in accordance with an awful necessity, so that it is never in a sinner's power to promise himself 'It is only this one time that I will do the wrong thing. Let me have one lapse and I will abjure the evil for ever after.' We have to reckon with the tremendous power of habit, and to bethink ourselves that a man may never commit a given sin, but that if he has committed it once, it is all but impossible that he will stop there. The incline is too slippery and the ice too smooth to risk a foot on it. Habit dominates, outward circumstances press, there springs up a need for repeating the draught, and for its being more highly spiced. Sin begets sin as fast as the green flies which infest rose-bushes. One has heard of slavers on the African coast speaking negroes fair, and tempting them on board by wonderful promises, but once the poor creatures are in the ship, then on with the hatches and, if need be, the chains.

III. Sin mocks fools by unforeseen consequences.

These are carefully concealed or madly disregarded, while we are in the stage of merely being tempted, but when we have done the evil, they are unmasked, like a battery against a detachment that has been trapped.

The previous denial that anything will come of the sin, and the subsequent proclamation that this ugly issue has come of it, are both parts of sin's mockery, and one knows not which is the more fiendish, the laugh with which she promises impunity or that with which she tells of the certainty of retribution. We may be mocked, but 'God is not mocked. Whatever a man soweth, that'—and not some other growth—'shall he also reap.' We dwell in an all-related order of things, in which no act but has its appropriate consequences, and in which it is only fools who say to themselves, 'I did not think it would matter much.' Each act of ours is at once sowing and reaping; a sowing, inasmuch as it sets in motion a train the issues of which may not be realised by us till the act has long been forgotten; a reaping, inasmuch as what we are and do to-day is the product of what we were and did in a forgotten past. We are what we are, because we were long ago what we were. As in these composite photographs, which are produced by laying one individual likeness on another, our present selves have our past selves preserved in them. We do not need to bring in a divine Judge into human life in order to be sure that, by the play of the natural laws of cause and effect, 'every transgression and disobedience receives its just recompense of reward.' Given the world as it is, and the continuous identity of a man, and you have all that is needed for an Iliad of woes flowing from every life that makes terms with sin. If we gather into one dismal pile the weakening of power for good, the strengthening of impulses to evil, the inward poverty, the unrest, the gnawings of conscience or its silence, the slavery under evil often loathed even while it is being obeyed, the dreary sense of inability to mend

oneself, and often the wreck of outward life which dog our sins like sleuth-hounds, surely we shall not need to imagine a future tribunal in order to be sure that sin is a murderess, or to hear her laugh as she mocks her helpless victims.

But as surely as there are in this present world experiences which must be regarded as consequences of sin, so surely do they all assume a more dreadful character and take on the office of prophets of a future. If man lives beyond the grave, there is nothing to suggest that he will there put off character as he puts off the bodily life. He will be there what he has made himself here. Only he will be so more intensely, more completely. The judgments of earth foretell and foreshadow a judgment beyond earth.

There is but one more word that I would say, and it is this. Jesus has come to set the captives of sin free from its mockery, its tyranny, its worst consequences. He breaks the power of past evil to domineer over us. He gives us a new life within, which has no heritage of evil to pervert it, no memories of evil to discourage it, no bias towards evil to lead it astray. As for the sins that we have done, He is ready to forgive, to seal to us God's forgiveness, and to take from our own self-condemnation all its bitterness and much of its hopelessness. For the past, His blood has taken away its guilt and power. For the future it sets us free from the mockery of our sin, and assures us of a future which will not be weakened or pained by remembrances of a sinful past. Sin mocks at fools, but they who have Christ for their Redeemer, their Righteousness, and their Life can smile at her impotent rage, and mock at her and her impotent attempts to terrify them and assert her lost power with vain threats.

HOLLOW LAUGHTER, SOLID JOY

'Even in laughter the heart is sorrowful ; and the end of that mirth is heaviness.'—PROVERBS xlv. 13.

'These things have I spoken unto you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be fulfilled.'—JOHN xv. 11 (R. V.).

A POET, who used to be more fashionable than he is now, pronounces 'happiness' to be our being's end and aim. That is not true, except under great limitations and with many explanations. It may be regarded as God's end, but it is ruinous to make it man's aim. It is by no means the highest conception of the Gospel to say that it makes men happy, however true it may be. The highest is that it makes them good. I put these two texts together, not only because they bring out the contrast between the laughter which is hollow and fleeting and the joy which is perfect and perpetual, but also because they suggest to us the difference in kind and object between earthly and heavenly joys ; which difference underlies the other between the boisterous laughter in which is no mirth and no continuance and the joy which is deep and abiding.

In the comparison which I desire to make between these two texts we must begin with that which is deepest, and consider—

I. The respective objects of earthly and heavenly joy.

Our Lord's wonderful words suggest that they who accept His sayings, that they who have His word abiding in them, have in a very deep sense His joy 'implanted in their hearts, to brighten and elevate their
as the sunshine flashes into silver the ripples of

the lake. What then were the sources of the calm joys of 'the Man of Sorrows'? Surely His was the perfect instance of 'rejoicing in the Lord always'—an unbroken communion with the Father. The consciousness that the divine pleasure ever rested on Him, and that all His thoughts, emotions, purposes, and acts were in perfect harmony with the perfect will of the perfect God, filled His humanity up to the very brim with gladness which the world could not take away, and which remains for us for ever as a type to which all our gladness must be conformed if it is to be worthy of Him and of us. As one of the Psalmists says, God is to be 'the gladness of our joy.' It is in Him, gazed upon by the faith and love of an obedient spirit, sought after by aspiration and possessed inwardly in peaceful communion, confirmed by union with Him in the acts of daily obedience, that the true joy of every human life is to be realised. They who have drunk of this deep fountain of gladness will not express their joy in boisterous laughter, which is the hollower the louder it is, and the less lasting the more noisy, but will manifest itself 'in the depth and not the tumult of the soul.'

Nor must we forget that 'My joy' co-existed with a profound experience of sorrow to which no human sorrow was ever like. Let us not forget that, while His joy filled His soul to the brim, He was 'acquainted with grief'; and let us not wonder if the strange surface contradiction is repeated in ourselves. It is more Christlike to have inexpressibly deep joy with surface sorrow, than to have a shallow laughter masking a hurtful sorrow.

We have to set the sources of earthly gladness side by side with those of Christ's joy to be aware of a contrast. His sprang from within, the world's is drawn

from without. His came from union with the Father, the world's largely depends on ignoring God. His needed no supplies from the gratifications ministered by sense, and so independent of the presence or absence of such; the world's need the constant contributions of outward good, and when these are cut off they droop and die. He who depends on outward circumstances for his joy is the slave of externals and the sport of time and chance.

II. The Christian's joy is full, the world's partial.

All human joys touch but part of our nature, the divine fills and satisfies all. In the former there is always some portion of us unsatisfied, like the deep pits on the moon's surface into which no light shines, and which show black on the silver face. No human joys wait to still conscience, which sits at the banquet like the skeleton that Egyptian feasters set at their tables. The old story told of a magician's palace blazing with lighted windows, but there was always one dark;—what shrouded figure sat behind it? Is there not always a surly 'elder brother' who will not come in however the musicians may pipe and the servants dance? Appetite may be satisfied, but what of conscience, and reason, and the higher aspirations of the soul? The laughter that echoes through the soul is the hollower the louder it is, and reverberates most through empty spaces.

But when Christ's joy remains in us our joy will be full. Its flowing tide will rush into and placidly occupy all the else oozy shallows of our hearts, even into the narrowest crannies its penetrating waters will pass, and everywhere will bring a flashing surface that will reflect in our hearts the calm blue above. We need nothing else if we have Christ and His joy within us.

If we have everything else, we need His joy within us, else ours will never be full.

III. The heavenly joys are perpetual, the earthly joys transient.

Many of our earthly joys die in the very act of being enjoyed. Those which depend on the gratification of some appetite expire in fruition, and at each recurrence are less and less complete. The influence of habit works in two ways to rob all such joys of their power to minister to us—it increases the appetite and decreases the power of the object to satisfy. Some are followed by swift revulsion and remorse; all soon become stale; some are followed by quick remorse; some are necessarily left behind as we go on in life. To the old man the pleasures of youth are but like children's toys long since outgrown and left behind. All are at the mercy of externals. Those which we have not left we have to leave. The saddest lives are those of pleasure-seekers, and the saddest deaths are those of the men who sought for joy where it was not to be found, and sought for their gratification in a world which leaves them, and which they have to leave.

There is a realm where abide 'fullness of joy and pleasures for ever more.' Surely they order their lives most wisely who look for their joys to nothing that earth holds, and have taken for their own the ancient vow: 'Though the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vine. . . . Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.' If 'My joy' abides in us in its calm and changeless depth, our joy will be 'full' whatever our circumstances may be; and we shall hear at last the welcome: 'Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.'

SATISFIED FROM SELF

‘... A good man shall be satisfied from himself.’—PROVERBS xiv. 14.

At first sight this saying strikes one as somewhat unlike the ordinary Scripture tone, and savouring rather of a Stoical self-complacency; but we recall parallel sayings, such as Christ's words, ‘The water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water’; and the Apostle's, ‘Then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone.’ We further note that the text has an antithetic parallel in the preceding clause, where the picture is drawn of ‘a backslider in heart,’ as ‘filled with his own ways’; so that both clauses set forth the familiar but solemn thought that a man's deeds react upon the doer, and apart from all thoughts of divine judgment, themselves bring certain retribution. To grasp the inwardness of this saying we must note that—

I. Goodness comes from godliness.

There is no more striking proof that most men are bad than the notion which they have of what is good. The word has been degraded to mean in common speech little more than amiability, and is applied with little discrimination to characters of which little more can be said than that they are facile and indulgent of evil. ‘A good fellow’ may be a very bad man. At the highest the epithet connotes merely more or less admirable motives and more or less admirable deeds as their results, whilst often its use is no more than a piece of unmeaning politeness. That was what the young ruler meant by addressing Christ as ‘Good Master’; and Christ's answer to him set him, and should set us, on asking ourselves why we call very ordinary men and very ordinary actions ‘good.’ The

scriptural notion is immensely deeper, and the scriptural employment of the word is immensely more restricted. It is more inward: it means that motives should be right before it calls any action good; it means that our central and all-influencing motive should be love to God and regard to His will. That is the Old Testament point of view as well as the New. Or to put it in other words, the 'good man' of the Bible is a man in whom outward righteousness flows from inward devotion and love to God. These two elements make up the character: godliness is an inseparable part of goodness, is the inseparable foundation of goodness, and the sole condition on which it is possible. But from this conception follows, that a man may be truly called good, although not perfect. He may be so and yet have many failures. The direction of his aspirations, not the degree to which these are fulfilled, determines his character, and his right to be reckoned a good man. Why was David called 'a man after God's own heart,' notwithstanding his frightful fall? Was it not because that sin was contrary to the main direction of his life, and because he had struggled to his feet again, and with tears and self-abasement, yet with unconquerable desire and hope, 'pressed toward the mark for the prize of his high calling'? David in the Old Testament and Peter in the New bid us be of good cheer, and warn us against the too common error of thinking that goodness means perfection. 'The new moon with a ragged edge' is even in its imperfections beautiful, and in its thinnest circle prophesies the perfect round.

Remembering this inseparable connection between godliness and goodness we further note that—

II. Godliness brings satisfaction.

There is a grim contrast between the two halves of this verse. The former shows us the backslider in heart as filled 'with his own ways.' He gets weary with satiety; with his doings he 'will be sick of them'; and the things which at first delighted will finally disgust and be done without zest. There is nothing sadder than the gloomy faces often seen in the world's festivals. But, on the other hand, the godly man will be satisfied from within. This is no Stoical proclamation of self-sufficingness. Self by itself satisfies no man, but self, become the abiding-place of God, does satisfy. A man alone is like 'the chaff which the wind driveth away'; but, rooted in God, he is 'like a tree planted by the rivers of water, whose leaf does not wither.' He has found all that he needs. God is no longer without him but within; and he who can say, 'I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me,' has within him the secret of peace and the source of satisfaction which can never say 'I thirst.' Such an inward self, in which God dwells and through which His sweet presence manifests itself in the renewed nature, sets man free from all dependence for blessedness on externals. We hang on them and are in despair if we lose them, because we have not the life of God within us. He who has such an indwelling, and he only, can truly say, 'All my possessions I carry with me.' Take him and strip from him, film after film, possessions, reputation, friends; hack him limb from limb, and as long as there is body enough left to keep life in him, he can say, 'I have all and abound.' 'Ye took joyfully the spoiling of your possessions, knowing that ye have your own selves for a better possession.'

III. Godly goodness brings inward satisfaction.

No man is satisfied with himself until he has sub-

jugated himself. What makes men restless and discontented is their tossing, anarchical desires. To live by impulse, or passion, or by anything but love to God, is to make ourselves our own tormentors. It is always true that he 'who loveth his life shall lose it,' and loses it by the very act of loving it. Most men's lives are like the troubled sea, 'which cannot rest,' and whose tossing surges, alas! 'cast up mire and dirt,' for their restless lives bring to the surface much that was meant to lie undisturbed in the depths.

But he who has subdued himself is like some still lake which 'heareth not the loud winds when they call,' and mirrors the silent heavens on its calm surface. But further, goodness brings satisfaction, because, as the Psalmist says, 'in keeping Thy commandments there is great reward.' There is a glow accompanying even partial obedience which diffuses itself with grateful warmth through the whole being of a man. And such goodness tends to the preservation of health of soul as natural, simple living to the health of the body. And that general sense of well-being brings with it a satisfaction compared with which all the feverish bliss of the voluptuary is poor indeed.

But we must not forget that satisfaction from one's self is not satisfaction *with* one's self. There will always be the imperfection which will always prevent self-righteousness. The good man after the Bible pattern most deeply knows his faults, and in that very consciousness is there a deep joy. To be ever aspiring onwards, and to know that our aspiration is no vain dream, this is joy. Still to press 'toward the mark,' still to have 'the yet untroubled world which gleams before us as we move,' and to know that we shall attain if we follow on, this is the highest bliss. Not the

accomplishment of our ideal, but the cherishing of it, is the true delight of life.

Such self-satisfying goodness comes only through Christ. He makes it possible for us to love God and to trust Him. Only when we know 'the love wherewith He has loved us,' shall we love with a love which will be the motive power of our lives. He makes it possible to live outward lives of obedience, which, imperfect as it is, has 'great reward.' He makes it possible for us to attain the yet unattained, and to be sure that we 'shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.' He has said, 'The water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up unto everlasting life.' Only when we can say, 'I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me,' will it be true of us in its fullest sense, 'A good man shall be satisfied from himself.'

WHAT I THINK OF MYSELF AND WHAT GOD THINKS OF ME

All the ways of a man are clean in his own eyes; but the Lord weigheth the spirits.'—PROVERBS xvi. 2.

'ALL the ways of a man'—then there is no such thing as being conscious of having gone wrong, and having got into miry and foul ways? Of course there is; and equally of course a broad statement such as this of my text is not to be pressed into literal accuracy, but is a simple, general assertion of what we all know to be true, that we have a strange power of blinding ourselves as to what is wrong in ourselves and in our actions. Part of the cure for that lies in the thought in the second clause of the text—'But the Lord weigheth the spirits.' He weighs them in a

balance, or as a man might take up something and poise it on his palm, moving his hand up and down till his muscles by their resistance gave him some inkling of its weight. But what is it that God weighs? 'The spirits.' We too often content ourselves with looking at our ways; God looks at ourselves. He takes the inner man into account, estimates actions by motives, and so very often differs from our judgment of ourselves and of one another.

Now so far the verse of my text carries me, and as a rule we have to keep ourselves within the limits of each verse in reading this Book of Proverbs, for two adjoining verses have very seldom anything to do with each other. But in the present case they have, for here is what follows: 'Commit thy works unto the Lord, and thy thoughts' (about thyself and everything else) 'shall be established.' That is to say, since we make such terrible blunders about the moral character of our own works, and since side by side with these erroneous estimates there is God's absolutely correct and all-penetrating one, common sense says: 'Put yourself into His hands, and then it will be all right.' So we consider now these very well-worn and familiar thoughts as to our strange blunders about ourselves, as to the contemporaneous divine estimate, which is absolutely correct, and as to the practical issues that come from two facts.

I. Our strange power of blinding ourselves.

It is difficult to make so threadbare a commonplace at all impressive. But yet if we would only take this thought, 'All the ways of a man'—that is me—'are right in his own eyes'—that is, my eyes—and apply it directly to our own personal experience and thoughts of ourselves, we should find that, like every other

commonplace of morality and religion, the apparently toothless generality has sharp enough teeth, and that the trite truth flashes up into strange beauty, and has power to purify and guide our lives. Some one says that 'recognised truths lie bedridden in the dormitory of the soul, side by side with exploded errors.' And I am afraid that that is true of this thought, that we cannot truly estimate ourselves.

'All the ways of a man are right in his own eyes.' For to begin with, we all know that there is nothing that we so habitually neglect as the bringing of conscience to bear right through all our lives. Sometimes it is because there is a temptation that appeals very strongly, perhaps to sense, perhaps to some strong inclination which has been strengthened by indulgence. And when the craving arises, that is no time to begin asking, 'Is it right, or is it wrong to yield?' That question stands small chance of being wisely considered at a moment when, under the goading of roused desire, a man is like a mad bull when it charges. It drops its head and shuts its eyes, and goes right forward, and no matter whether it smashes its horns against an iron gate, and damages them and itself, or not, on it will go. So when great temptations rise—and we all know such times in our lives—we are in no condition to discuss that question with ourselves. Sometimes the craving is so vehement that if we could not get this thing that we want without putting our hands through the sulphurous smoke of the bottomless pit, we should thrust them out to grasp it. But in regard to the smaller commonplace matters of daily life, too, we all know that there are whole regions of our lives which seem to us to be so small that it is hardly worth while summoning the august thought

of 'right or wrong?' to decide them. Yes, and a thousand smugglers that go across a frontier, each with a little package of contraband goods that does not pay any duty, make a large aggregate at the year's end. It is the trifles of life that shape life, and it is to them that we so frequently fail in applying, honestly and rigidly, the test, 'Is this right or wrong?' 'He that is faithful in that which is least,' and conscientious down to the smallest things, 'is faithful also in much.' The legal maxim has it, 'The law does not care about the very smallest matters.' What that precisely means, as a legal maxim, I do not profess to know, but it is rank heresy in regard to conduct and morality. Look after the pennies, and the pounds will look after themselves. Get the habit of bringing conscience to bear on little things, or you will never be able to bring it to bear when great temptations come and the crises emerge in your lives. Thus, by reason of that deficiency in the habitual application of conscience to our lives, we slide through, and take for granted that all our ways are right in our eyes.

Then there is another thing: we not only neglect the rigid application of conscience to all our lives, but we have a double standard, and the notion of right and wrong which we apply to our neighbours is very different from that which we apply to ourselves. No wonder that the criminal is acquitted, and goes away from the tribunal 'without a stain on his character,' when he is his own judge and jury. 'All the ways of a man are right in his own eyes,' but the very same 'ways' that you allow to pass muster and condone in yourselves, you visit with sharp and unfailing censure in others. That strange self-complacency which we have, which is perfectly undisturbed by the most

general confessions of sinfulness, and only shies when it is brought up to particular details of faults, we all know is very deep in ourselves.

Then there is another thing to be remembered, and that is—the enormous and the tragical influence of habit in dulling the mirror of our souls, on which our deeds are reflected in their true image. There are places in Europe where the peasantry have become so accustomed to minute and constantly repeated doses of arsenic that it is actually a minister of health to them, and what would poison you is food for them. We all know that we may sit in a hall like this, packed full and steaming, while the condensed breath is running down the windows, and never be aware of the foulness of the odours and the air. But when we go out and feel the sweet, pure breath of the unpolluted atmosphere, then we know how habit has dulled the lungs. And so habit dulls the conscience. According to the old saying, the man that began by carrying a calf can carry an ox at the end, and feel no burden. What we are accustomed to do we scarcely ever recognise to be wrong, and it is these things which pass because they are habitual that do more to wreck lives than occasional outbursts of far worse evils, according to the world's estimate of them. Habit dulls the eye.

Yes; and more than that, the conscience needs educating just as much as any other faculty. A man says, 'My conscience acquits me'; then the question is, 'And what sort of a conscience have you got, if it acquits you?' All that your conscience says is, 'It is right to do what is right, it is wrong to do what is wrong.' But for the explanation of what is wrong and what is right you have to go somewhere else

than to your consciences. You have to go to your reason, and your judgment, and your common sense, and a hundred other sources. And then, when you have found out what is right and what is wrong, you will hear the voice saying, 'Do that, and do not do this.' Every one of us has faults that we know nothing about, and that we bring up to the tribunal of our consciences, and wipe our mouths and say, 'We have done no harm.' 'I thought within myself that I verily ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth.' 'They think that they do God service.' Many things that seem to us virtues are vices.

And as for the individual so for the community. The perception of what is right and what is wrong needs long educating. When I was a boy the whole Christian Church of America, with one voice, declared that 'slavery was a patriarchal institution appointed by God.' The Christian Church of to-day has not awakened either to the sin of war or of drink. And I have not the smallest doubt that there are hosts of things which public opinion, and Christian public opinion, regards to-day as perfectly allowable and innocent, and, perhaps, even praiseworthy, and over which it will ask God's blessing, at which, in a hundred years our descendants will hold up their hands in wonder, and say, 'How did good people—and good people they no doubt were—tolerate such a condition of things for a moment?' 'All a man's ways are right in his own eyes,' and he needs a great deal of teaching before he comes to understand what, according to God's will, really is right and what is wrong.

Now let me turn for a moment to the contrasted picture, with which I can only deal in a sentence or two

II. The divine estimate.

I have already pointed out the two emphatic thoughts that lie in that clause, 'God weigheth,' and 'weigheth the spirits.' I need not repeat what I said, in the introduction to these remarks, upon this subject. Just let us take with us these two thoughts, that the same actions which we sometimes test, in our very defective and loaded balances, have also to go into the infallible scales, and that the actions go with their interpretation in their motive. 'God weighs the spirits.' He reads what we do by His knowledge of what we are. We reveal to one another what we are by what we do, and, as is a commonplace, none of us can penetrate, except very superficially and often inaccurately, to the motives that actuate. But the motive is three-fourths of the action. God does not go from without, as it were, inwards; from our actions to estimate our characters; but He starts with the character and the motive—the habitual character and the occasional motive—and by these He reads the deed. He weighs, ponders, penetrates to the heart of the thing, and He weighs the spirits.

So on the one hand, 'I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief,' and many a deed which the world would condemn, and in which we onlookers would see evil, God does not wholly condemn, because He, being the Inlooker as well as the Onlooker, sees the albeit mistaken yet pure motives that underlay it. So it is conceivable that the inquisitor, and the heretic that he sent to the stake, may stand side by side in God's estimate; the one if he were actuated by pure zeal for the truth, the other because he was actuated by self-sacrifice in loyalty to his Lord. And, on the other hand, many a deed that goes flaunting

through the world in 'purple and fine linen' will be stripped of its gauds, and stand naked and ugly before the eyes of 'Him with whom we have to do.' He 'weighs the spirits.'

Lastly, a word about—

III. The practical issues of these thoughts.

'Commit thy works unto the Lord'—that is to say, do not be too sure that you are right because you do not think you are wrong. We should be very distrustful of our own judgments of ourselves, especially when that judgment permits us to do certain things. 'I know nothing against myself,' said the Apostle, 'yet am I not hereby justified.' And again, still more emphatically, he lays down the principle that I would have liked to have enlarged upon if I had had time. 'Happy is he that condemneth not himself in the things which he alloweth.' You may have made the glove too easy by stretching. It is possible that you may think that something is permissible and right which a wiser and more rigid and Christlike judgment of yourself would have taught you was wrong. Look under the stones for the reptiles, and remember the prayer, 'Cleanse thou me from secret faults,' and distrust a permitting and easy conscience.

Then, again, let us seek the divine strengthening and illumination. We have to seek that in some very plain ways. Seek it by prayer. There is nothing so powerful in stripping off from our besetting sins their disguises and masks as to go to God with the honest petition: 'Search me . . . and try me . . . and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.' Brethren! if we will do that, we shall get answers that will startle us, that will humble us, but that will be blessed beyond all other blessedness,

and will bring to light the 'hidden things of darkness. Then, after they are brought to light and cast out, 'then shall every man have praise of God.'

We ought to keep ourselves in very close union with Jesus Christ, because if we cling to Him in simple faith, He will come into our hearts, and we shall be saved from walking in darkness, and have the light of life shining down upon our deeds. Christ is the conscience of the Christian man's conscience, who, by His voice in the hearts that wait upon Him, says, 'Do this,' and they do it. It is when He is in our spirits that our estimate of ourselves is set right, and that we hear the voice saying, 'This is the way, walk ye in it'; and not merely do we hear the voice, but we get help to our feet in running in the way of His commandments, with enlarged and confirmed hearts. Brethren! for the discovery of our faults, which we ought all to long for, and for the conquest of these discovered faults, which, if we are Christians, we do long for, our confidence is in Him. And if you trust Him, 'the blood of Christ will cleanse'—because it comes into our life's blood—'from all sin.'

And the last thing that I would say is this. We must punctiliously obey every dictate that speaks in our own consciences, especially when it urges us to unwelcome duties or restrains us from too welcome sins. 'To him that hath shall be given'—and the sure way to condemn ourselves to utter blindness as to our true selves is to pay no attention to the glimmers of light that we have, whilst, on the other hand, the sure way to be led into fuller illumination is to follow faithfully whatsoever sparkles of light may shine upon our hearts. 'Do the duty that lies nearest thee.' Put thy trust in Jesus Christ. Distrust thine own approbation

or condonation of thine actions, and ever turn to Him and say, 'Show me what to do, and make me willing and fit to do it.' Then there will be little contrariety between your estimate of your ways and God's judgments of your spirits.

A BUNDLE OF PROVERBS

'Understanding is a wellspring of life unto him that hath it: but the instruction of fools is folly. 23. The heart of the wise teacheth his mouth, and addeth learning to his lips. 24. Pleasant words are as an honeycomb, sweet to the soul, and health to the bones. 25. There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death. 26. He that laboureth laboureth for himself; for his mouth craveth it of him. 27. An ungodly man diggeth up evil: and in his lips there is as a burning fire. 28. A froward man soweth strife: and a whisperer separateth chief friends. 29. A violent man enticeth his neighbour, and leadeth him into the way that is not good. 30. He shutteth his eyes to devise froward things: moving his lips he bringeth evil to pass. 31. The hoary head is a crown of glory, if it be found in the way of righteousness. 32. He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city. 33. The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord.'—PROVERBS XVI. 22-33.

A SLIGHT thread of connection may be traced in some of the proverbs in this passage. Verse 22, with its praise of 'Wisdom,' introduces one instance of Wisdom's excellence in verse 23, and that again, with its reference to speech, leads on to verse 24 and its commendation of 'pleasant words.' Similarly, verses 27-30 give four pictures of vice, three of them beginning with 'a man.' We may note, too, that, starting with verse 26, every verse till verse 30 refers to some work of 'the mouth' or 'lips.'

The passage begins with one phase of the contrast between Wisdom and Folly, which this book is never weary of emphasising and underscoring. We shall miss the force of its most characteristic teaching unless we keep well in mind that the two opposites of Wisdom and Folly do not refer only or chiefly to intellectual distinctions. The very basis of 'Wisdom,' as this book

conceives it, is the 'fear of the Lord,' without which the man of biggest, clearest brain, and most richly stored mind, is, in its judgment, 'a fool.' Such 'understanding,' which apprehends and rightly deals with the deepest fact of life, our relation to God and to His law, is a 'well-spring of life.' The figure speaks still more eloquently to Easterns than to us. In those hot lands the cool spring, bursting through the baked rocks or burning sand, makes the difference between barrenness and fertility, the death of all green things and life. So where true Wisdom is deep in a heart, it will come flashing up into sunshine, and will quicken the seeds of all good as it flows through the deeds. 'Everything liveth whithersoever the river cometh.' Productiveness, refreshment, the beauty of the sparkling wavelets, the music of their ripples against the stones, and all the other blessings and delights of a perpetual fountain, have better things corresponding to them in the life of the man who is wise with the true Wisdom which begins with the fear of God. Just as *it* is active in the life, so is Folly. But its activity is not blessing and gladdening, but punitive. For all sin automatically works its own chastisement, and the curse of Folly is that, while it corrects, it prevents the 'fool' from profiting by the correction. Since it punishes itself, one might expect that it would cure itself, but experience shows that, while it wields a rod, its subjects 'receive no correction.' That insensibility is the paradox and the Nemesis of 'Folly.'

The Old Testament ethics are remarkable for their solemn sense of the importance of words, and Proverbs shares in that sense to the full. In some aspects, speech is a more perfect self-revelation than act. So the outflow of the fountain in words comes next. Wise

heart makes wise speech. That may be looked at in two ways. It may point to the utterance by word as the most precious, and incumbent on its possessor, of all the ways of manifesting Wisdom; or it may point to the only source of real 'learning,'—namely, a wise heart. In the former view, it teaches us our solemn obligation not to hide our light under a bushel, but to speak boldly and lovingly all the truth which God has taught us. A 'dumb Christian is a monstrosity. We are bound to give voice to our 'Wisdom.' In the other aspect, it reminds us that there is a better way of getting Wisdom than by many books,—namely, by filling our hearts, through communion with God, with His own will. Then, whether we have worldly 'learning' or no, we shall be able to instruct many, and lead them to the light which has shone on us.

There are many kinds of pleasant words, some of which are not like 'honey,' but like poison hid in jam. Insincere compliments, flatteries when rebukes would be fitting, and all the brood of civil conventionalities, are not the words meant here. Truly pleasant ones are those which come from true Wisdom, and may often have a surface of bitterness like the prophet's roll, but have a core of sweetness. It is a great thing to be able to speak necessary and unwelcome truths with lips into which grace is poured. A spoonful of money catches more flies than a hogshhead of vinegar.

Verse 25 has no connection with its context. It teaches two solemn truths, according to the possible double meaning of 'right.' If that word means ethically right, then the saying sets forth the terrible possibility of conscience being wrongly instructed, and sanctioning gross sin. If it means only *straight*, or level—that is, successful and easy—the saying enforces

the not less solemn truth that sin deceives as to its results, and that the path of wrong-doing, which is flowery and smooth at first, grows rapidly thorny, and goes fast downhill, and ends at last in a *cul-de-sac*, of which death is the only outlet. We are not to trust our own consciences, except as enlightened by God's Word. We are not to listen to sin's lies, but to fix it well in our minds that there is only one way which leads to life and peace, the narrow way of faith and obedience.

The Revised Version's rendering of verse 26 gives the right idea. 'The appetite,' or hunger, 'of the labourer labours for him' (that is, the need of food is the main-spring of work), and it lightens the work to which it impels. So hunger is a blessing. That is true in regard to the body. The manifold material industries of men are, at bottom, prompted by the need to earn something to eat. The craving which drives to such results is a thing to be thankful for. It is better to live where toil is needful to sustain life than in lazy lands where an hour's work will provide food for a week. But the saying reaches to spiritual desires, and anticipates the beatitude on those who 'hunger and thirst after righteousness.' Happy they who feel that craving, and are driven by it to the labour for the bread which comes down from heaven! 'This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent.'

The next three proverbs (vs. 27-29) give three pictures of different types of bad men. First, we have 'the worthless man' (Rev. Ver.), literally 'a man of Belial,' which last word probably means worthlessness. His work is 'digging evil'; his words are like scorching fire. To dig evil seems to have a wider sense than has digging a pit for others (Ps. vii. 15), which is usually

taken as a parallel. The man is not merely malicious toward others, but his whole activity goes to further evil. It is the material in which he delights to work. What mistaken spade husbandry it is to spend labour on such a soil! What can it grow but thistles and poisonous plants? His words are as bad as his deeds. No honey drops from *his* lips, but scorching fire, which burns up not only reputations but tries to consume all that is good. As James says, such a tongue is 'set on fire of hell.' The picture is that of a man bad through and through. But there may be indefinitely close approximations to it, and no man can say, 'Thus far will I go in evil ways, and no further.'

The second picture is of a more specific kind. The 'froward man' here seems to be the same as the slanderer in the next clause. He utters perverse things, and so soweth strife and parts friends. There are people whose mouths are as full of malicious whispers as a sower's basket is of seed, and who have a base delight in flinging them broadcast. Sometimes they do not think of what the harvest will be, but often they chuckle to see it springing in the mistrust and alienation of former friends. A loose tongue often does as much harm as a bitter one, and delight in dwelling on people's faults is not innocent because the tattler did not think of the mischief he was setting agoing.

In verse 29 another type of evil-doer is outlined—the opposite, in some respects, of the preceding. The slanderer works secretly; this mischief-maker goes the plain way to work. He uses physical force or 'violence.' But how does that fit in with 'enticeth'? It may be that the enticement of his victim into a place suitable for robbing or murder is meant, but more probably there

is here the same combination of force and craft as in chapter i. 10-14. Criminals have a wicked delight in tempting innocent people to join their gangs. A lawless desperado is a hotbed of infection.

Verse 30 draws a portrait of a bad man. It is a bit of homely physiognomical observation. A man with a trick of closing his eyes has something working in his head; and, if he is one of these types of men, one may be sure that he is brewing mischief. Compressed lips mean concentrated effort, or fixed resolve, or suppressed feeling, and in any of these cases are as a danger signal, warning that the man is at work on some evil deed.

Two sayings follow, which contrast goodness with the evils just described. The 'if' in verse 31 weakens the strong assertion of the proverb. 'The hoary head is a crown of glory; it is found in the way of righteousness.' That is but putting into picturesque form the Old Testament promise of long life to the righteous—a promise which is not repeated in the new dispensation, but which is still often realised. 'Whom the gods love, die young,' is a heathen proverb; but there is a natural tendency in the manner of life which Christianity produces to prolong a man's days. A heart at peace, because stayed on God, passions held well in hand, an avoidance of excesses which eat away strength, do tend to length of life, and the opposites of these do tend to shorten it. How many young men go home from our great cities every year, with their 'bones full of the iniquities of their youth,' to die!

If we are to tread the way of righteousness, and so come to 'reverence and the silver hair,' we must govern ourselves. So the next proverb extols the ruler of his own spirit as 'more than conquerors,' whose triumphs

are won in such vulgar fields as battles and sieges. Our sorest fights and our noblest victories are within.

‘Unless above himself he can
Erect himself, how poor a thing is man!’

Verse 31 takes the casting of the lot as one instance of the limitation of all human effort, in all which we can but use the appropriate means, while the whole issue must be left in God’s hands. The Jewish law did not enjoin the lot, but its use seems to have been frequent. The proverb presents in the sharpest relief a principle which is true of all our activity. The old proverb-maker knew nothing of chance. To him there were but two real moving forces in the world—man and God. To the one belonged sowing the seed, doing his part, whether casting the lot or toiling at his task. His force was real, but derived and limited. Efforts and attempts are ours; results are God’s. We sow; He ‘gives it a body as it pleases Him.’ Nothing happens by accident. Man’s little province is bounded on all sides by God’s, and the two touch. There is no neutral territory between, where godless chance rules.

TWO FORTRESSES

‘The name of the Lord is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe. 11. The rich man’s wealth is his strong city, and as an high wall in his own conceit.’—PROVERBS XVIII. 10, 11.

THE mere reading of these two verses shows that, contrary to the usual rule in the Book of Proverbs, they have a bearing on each other. They are intended to suggest a very strong contrast, and that contrast is even more emphatic in the original than in our translation; because, as the margin of your Bibles will tell

you, the last word of the former verse might be more correctly rendered, 'the righteous runneth into it, and is *set on high*.' It is the same word which is employed in the next verse—'a high wall.'

So we have 'the strong tower' and 'the strong city'; the man lifted up above danger on the battlements of the one, and the man fancying himself to be high above it (and only fancying himself) in the imaginary safety of the other.

I. Consider then, first, the two fortresses.

One need only name them side by side to feel the full force of the intended contrast. On the one hand, the name of the Lord with all its depths and glories, with its blaze of lustrous purity, and infinitudes of inexhaustible power; and on the other, 'the rich man's wealth.' What contempt is expressed in putting the two side by side! It is as if the author had said, 'Look on this picture and on that!' Two fortresses! Yes! The one is like Gibraltar, inexpugnable on its rock, and the other is like a painted castle on the stage; flimsy canvas that you could put your foot through—solidity by the side of nothingness. For even the poor appearance of solidity is an illusion, as our text says with bitter emphasis—'a high wall *in his own conceit*.'

'The name of the Lord,' of course, is the Biblical expression for the whole character of God, as He has made it known to us, or in other words, for God Himself, as He has been pleased to reveal Himself to mankind. The syllables of that name are all the deeds by which He has taught us what He is; every act of power, of wisdom, of tenderness, of grace that has manifested these qualities and led us to believe that they are all infinite. In the name, in its narrower sense, the name of *Jehovah*, there is much of 'the name'

in its wider sense. For that name 'Jehovah,' both by its signification and by the circumstances under which it was originally employed, tells us a great deal about God. It tells us, for instance, by virtue of its signification, that He is self-existent, depending upon no other creature. 'I AM THAT I AM!' No other being can say that. All the rest of us have to say, 'I am that which God made me.' Circumstances and a hundred other things have made me; God finds the law of His being and the fountain of His being within Himself.

'He sits on no precarious throne,
Nor borrows leave to be.'

His name proclaims Him to be self-existent, and as self-existent, eternal; and as eternal, changeless; and as self-existent, eternal, changeless, infinite in all the qualities by which He makes Himself known. This boundless Being, all full of wisdom, power, and tenderness, with whom we can enter into relations of amity and concord, surely He is 'a strong tower into which we may run and be safe.'

But far beyond even the sweep of that great name, Jehovah, is the knowledge of God's deepest heart and character which we learn in Him who said, 'I have declared Thy name unto My brethren, and will declare it.' Christ in His life and death, in His meekness, sweetness, gentleness, calm wisdom, infinite patience, attractiveness; yearning over sinful hearts, weeping over rebels, in the graciousness of His life, in the sacredness and the power of His Cross, is the Revealer to our hearts of the heart of God. If I may so say, He has builded 'the strong tower' broader, has expanded its area and widened its gate, and lifted its summit yet nearer the heavens, and made the name of God a wider

name and a mightier name, and a name of surer defence and blessing than ever it was before.

And so, dear brethren! it all comes to this, the name that is 'the strong tower' is the name 'My Father!' a Father of infinite tenderness and wisdom and power. Oh! where can the child rest more quietly than on the mother's breast, where can the child be safer than in the circle of the father's arms? 'The name of the Lord is a strong tower.'

Now turn to the other for a moment: 'The rich man's wealth is' (with great emphasis on the next little word) '*his* strong city, and as a high wall in his own conceit.' Of course we have not to deal here only with wealth in the shape of money, but all external and material goods, the whole mass of the 'things seen and temporal,' are gathered together here in this phrase.

Men use their imaginations in very strange fashion, and make, or fancy they make, for themselves out of the things of the present life a defence and a strength. Like some poor lunatic, out upon a moor, that fancies himself ensconced in a castle; like some barbarous tribes behind their stockades or crowding at the back of a little turf wall, or in some old tumble-down fort that the first shot will bring rattling down about their ears, fancying themselves perfectly secure and defended—so do men deal with these outward things that are given them for another purpose altogether: they make of them defences and fortresses.

It is difficult for a man to have them and not to trust them. So Jesus said to His disciples once: 'How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the Kingdom'; and when they were astonished at His words, He repeated them with the significant variation, 'How hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter

into the Kingdom of God.' So He would teach that the misuse and not the possession of wealth is the barrier, but so, too, He would warn us that, nine times out of ten, the possession of them in more than a very modest measure, tempts a man into confidence in them.

The illusion is one that besets us all. We are all tempted to make a defence of the things that we can see and handle. Is it not strange, and is it not sad, that most of us just turn the truth round about and suppose that the real defence is the imaginary, and that the imaginary one is the real? How many men are there in this chapel who, if they spoke out of their deepest convictions, would say: 'Oh yes! the promises of God are all very well, but I would rather have the cash down. I suppose that I may trust that He will provide bread and water, and all the things that I need, but I would rather have a good solid balance at the banker's.' How many of you would rather honestly, and at the bottom of your hearts, have that than God's word for your defence? How many of you think that to trust in a living God is but grasping at a very airy and unsubstantial kind of support; and that the real solid defence is the defence made of the things that you can see?

My brother! it is exactly the opposite way. Turn it clean round, and you get the truth. The unsubstantial shadows are the material things that you can see and handle; illusory as a dream, and as little able to ward off the blows of fate as a soap bubble. The real is the unseen beyond—'the things that *are*,' and He who alone really is, and in His boundless and absolute Being is our only defence.

In one aspect or another, that false imagination with

which my last text deals is the besetting sin of Manchester. Not the rich man only, but the poor man just as much, is in danger of it. The poor man who thinks that everything would be right if only he were rich, and the rich man who thinks that everything is right because he *is* rich, are exactly the same man. The circumstances differ, but the one man is but the other turned inside out. And all round about us we see the fierce fight to get more and more of these things, the tight grip of them when we have got them, the overestimate of the value of them, the contempt for the people who have less of them than ourselves. Our aristocracy is an aristocracy of wealth; in some respects, one by no means to be despised, because there often go a great many good qualities to the making and the stewardship of wealth; but still it is an evil that men should be so largely estimated by their money as they are here. It is not a sound state of opinion which has made 'what is he *worth*?' mean 'how much of *it* has he?' We are taught here to look upon the prizes of life as being mainly wealth. To win that is 'success'—'prosperity'—and it is very hard for us all not to be influenced by the prevailing tone.

I would urge you, young men, especially to lay this to heart—that of all delusions that can beset you in your course, none will work more disastrously than the notion that the *summum bonum*, the shield and stay of a man, is the 'abundance of the things that he possesses.' I fancy I see more listless, discontented, unhappy faces looking out of carriages than I see upon the pavement. And I am sure of this, at any rate, that all which is noble and sweet and good in life can be wrought out and possessed upon as much bread and water as will keep body and soul together, and as much furniture as

will enable a man to sit at his meal and lie down at night. And as for the rest, it has many advantages and blessings, but oh! it is all illusory as a defence against the evils that will come, sooner or later, to every life.

II. Consider next how to get into the true Refuge.

'The righteous runneth into it and is safe,' says my text. You may get into the illusory one very easily. Imagination will take you there. There is no difficulty at all about that. And yet the way by which a man makes this world his defence may teach you a lesson as to how you can make God your defence. How *does* a man make this world his defence? By trusting to it. He that says to the fine gold, 'Thou art my confidence,' has made it his fortress—and that is how you will make God your fortress—by trusting to *Him*. The very same emotion, the very same act of mind, heart, and will, may be turned either upwards or downwards, as you can turn the beam from a lantern which way you please. Direct it earthwards, and you 'trust in the uncertainty of riches.' Flash it heavenwards, and you 'trust in the living God.'

And that same lesson is taught by the words of our text, 'The righteous runneth into it.' I do not dwell upon the word 'righteous.' That is the Old Testament point of view, which could not conceive it possible that any man could have deep and close communion with God, except on condition of a pure character. I will not speak of that at present, but point to the picturesque metaphor, which will tell us a great deal more about what faith is than many a philosophical dissertation. Many a man who would be perplexed by a theologian's talk will understand this: 'The righteous runneth into the name of the Lord.'

The metaphor brings out the idea of eager haste in betaking oneself to the shelter, as when an invading army comes into a country, and the unarmed peasants take their portable belongings and their cattle, and catch up their children in their arms, and set their wives upon their mules, and make all haste to some fortified place; or as when the manslayer in Israel fled to the city of refuge, or as when Lot hurried for his life out of Sodom. There would be no dawdling then; but with every muscle strained, men would run into the stronghold, counting every minute a year till they were inside its walls, and heard the heavy door close between them and the pursuer. No matter how rough the road, or how overpowering the heat—no time to stop to gather flowers, or even diamonds on the road, when a moment's delay might mean the enemy's sword in your heart!

Now that metaphor is frequently used to express the resolved and swift act by which, recognising in Jesus Christ, who declares the name of the Lord, our hiding-place, we shelter ourselves in Him, and rest secure. One of the picturesque words by which the Old Testament expresses 'trust' means literally 'to flee to a refuge.' The Old Testament *trust* is the New Testament *faith*, even as the Old Testament '*Name of the Lord*' answers to the New Testament '*Name of Jesus*.' And so we run into this sure hiding-place and strong fortress of the name of the Lord, when we betake ourselves to Jesus and put our trust in Him as our defence.

Such a faith—the trust of mind, heart, and will—laying hold of the name of the Lord, makes us 'righteous,' and so capable of 'dwelling with the devouring fire' of God's perfect purity. The Old Testament point

of view was righteousness, in order to abiding in God. The New Testament begins, as it were, at an earlier stage in the religious life, and tells us how to get the righteousness, without which, it holds as strongly as the Old Testament, 'no man shall see the Lord.' It shows us that our faith, by which we run into that fortress, fits us to enter the fortress, because it makes us partakers of Christ's purity.

So my earnest question to you all is—Have you 'fled for refuge to lay hold' on that Saviour in whom God has set His name? Like Lot out of Sodom, like the manslayer to the city of refuge, like the unwarlike peasants to the baron's tower, before the border thieves, have you gone thither for shelter from all the sorrows and guilt and dangers that are marching terrible against you? Can you take up as yours the old grand words of exuberant trust in which the Psalmist heaps together the names of the Lord, as if walking about the city of his defence, and telling the towers thereof, 'The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower'? If you have, then 'because you have made the Lord your refuge, there shall no evil befall you.'

III. So we have, lastly, what comes of sheltering in these two refuges.

As to the former of them, I said at the beginning of these remarks that the words 'is safe' were more accurately as well as picturesquely rendered by 'is set aloft.' They remind us of the psalm which has many points of resemblance with this text, and which gives the very same thought when it says, 'I will set him on high, because he hath known My name.' The fugitive

is taken within the safe walls of the strong tower, and is set up high on the battlements, looking down upon the baffled pursuers, and far beyond the reach of their arrows. To stand upon that tower lifts a man above the region where temptations fly, above the region where sorrow strikes; lifts him above sin and guilt and condemnation and fear, and calumny and slander, and sickness, and separation and loneliness and death; 'and all the ills that flesh is heir to.'

Or, as one of the old Puritan commentators has it: 'The tower is so deep that no pioneer can undermine it, so thick that no cannon can breach it, so high that no ladder can scale it.' 'The righteous runneth into it,' and is perched up there; and can look down like Lear from his cliff, and all the troubles that afflict the lower levels shall 'show scarce so gross as beetles' from the height where he stands, safe and high, hidden in the name of the Lord.

I say little about the other side. Brethren! the world in any of its forms, the good things of this life in any shape, whether that of money or any other, can do a great deal for us. They can keep a great many inconveniences from us, they can keep a great many cares and pains and sorrows from us. I was going to say, to carry out the metaphor, they can keep the rifle-bullets from us. But, ah! when the big siege-guns get into position and begin to play; when the great trials that every life must have, sooner or later, come to open fire at us, then the defence that anything in this outer world can give comes rattling about our ears very quickly. It is like the pasteboard helmet which looked as good as if it had been steel, and did admirably as long as no sword struck it.

There is only one thing that will keep us peaceful

and unharmed, and that is to trust our poor shelterless lives and sinful souls to the Saviour who has died for us. In Him we find the hiding-place, in which secure, as beneath the shadow of a great rock, dreaded evils will pass us by, as impotent to hurt as savages before a castle fortified by modern skill. All the bitterness of outward calamities will be taken from them before they reach us. Their arrows will still wound, but He will have wiped the poison off before He lets them be shot at us. The force of temptation will be weakened, for if we live near Him we shall have other tastes and desires. The bony fingers of the skeleton Death, who drags men from all other homes, will not dislodge us from our fortress - dwelling. Hid in Him we shall neither fear going down to the grave, nor coming up from it, nor judgment, nor eternity. Then, I beseech you, make no delay. Escape! flee for your life! A growing host of evil marches swift against you. Take Christ for your defence and cry to Him,

‘Lo! from sin and grief and shame,
Hide me, Jesus! in Thy name.’

A STRING OF PEARLS

‘Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise. 2. The fear of a king is as the roaring of a lion: whose provoketh him to anger sinneth against his own soul. 3. It is an honour for a man to cease from strife: but every fool will be meddling. 4. The sluggard will not plough by reason of the cold; therefore shall he beg in harvest, and have nothing. 5. Counsel in the heart of man is like deep water; but a man of understanding will draw it out. 6. Most men will proclaim every one his own goodness: but a faithful man who can find? 7. The just man walketh in his integrity: his children are blessed after him.’—PROVERBS XX. 1-7.

THE connection between the verses of this passage is only in their common purpose to set forth some details of a righteous life, and to brand the opposite

vices. A slight affinity may be doubtfully traced in one or two adjacent proverbs, but that is all.

First comes temperance, enforced by the picture of a drunkard. Wine and strong drink are, as it were, personified, and their effects on men are painted as their own characters. And an ugly picture it is, which should hang in the gallery of every young man and woman. 'Wine is a mocker.' Intemperance delights in scoffing at all pure, lofty, sacred things. It is the ally of wild profanity, which sends up its tipsy and clumsy ridicule against Heaven itself. If a man wants to lose his sense of reverence, his susceptibility for what is noble, let him take to drink, and the thing is done. If he would fain keep these fresh and quick, let him eschew what is sure to deaden them. Of course there are other roads to the same end, but there is no other end to this road. Nobody ever knew a drunkard who did not scoff at things that should be revered, and that because he knew that he was acting in defiance of them.

'A brawler,' or, as Delitzsch renders it, 'boisterous'—look into a liquor-store if you want to verify that, or listen to a drunken party coming back from an excursion and making night hideous with their bellowings, or go to any police court on a Monday morning. We in England are familiar with the combination on police charge-sheets, 'drunk and disorderly.' So does the old proverb-maker seem to have been. Drink takes off the brake, and every impulse has its own way, and makes as much noise as it can.

The word rendered in Authorised Version 'is deceived,' and in Revised Version 'erreth,' is literally 'staggers' or 'reels,' and it is more graphic to keep that meaning. There is a world of quiet irony in the

unexpectedly gentle close of the sentence, 'is not wise.' How much stronger the assertion might have been! Look at the drunkard as he staggers along, scoffing at everything purer and higher than himself, and ready to fight with his own shadow, and incapable of self-control. He has made himself the ugly spectacle you see. Will anybody call *him* wise?

The next proverb applies directly to a state of things which most nations have outgrown. Kings who can give full scope to their anger, and who inspire mainly terror, are anomalies in civilised countries now. The proverb warns that it is no trifle to rouse the lion from his lair, and that when he begins to growl there is danger. The man who stirs him 'forfeits his own life,' or, at all events, imperils it.

The word rendered 'sins' has for its original meaning 'misses,' and seems to be so used here, as also in Proverbs viii. 36. 'Against' is a supplement. The maxim inculcates the wisdom of avoiding conduct which might rouse an anger so sure to destroy its object. And that is a good maxim for ordinary times in all lands, monarchies or republics. For there is in constitutional kingdoms and in republics an uncrowned monarch, to the full as irresponsible, as easily provoked, and as relentless in hunting its opponents to destruction, as any old-world tyrant. Its name is Public Opinion. It is not well to provoke it. If a man does, let him well understand that he takes his life, or what is sometimes dearer than life, in his hand. Not only self-preservation, which the proverb and Scripture recognise as a legitimate motive, but higher considerations, dictate compliance with the ruling forces of our times, as far as may be. Conscience only has the right to limit this precept, and to say, 'Let the

brute roar, and never mind if you *do* forfeit your life. It is your duty to say "No," though all the world should be saying "Yes."

A slight thread of connection may be established between the second and third proverbs. The latter, like the former, commends peacefulness and condemns pugnacity. Men talk of 'glory' as the warrior's meed, and the so-called Christian world has not got beyond the semi-barbarous stage which regards 'honour' as mainly secured by fighting. But this ancient proverb-maker had learned a better conception of what 'honour' or 'glory' was, and where it grew.

'Peace hath her victories
No less renowned than war,'

said Milton. But our proverb goes farther than 'no less,' and gives *greater* glory to the man who never takes up arms, or who lays them down. The saying is true, not only about warfare, but in all regions of life. Fighting is generally wasted time. Controversialists of all sorts, porcupine-like people, who go through the world all sharp quills sticking out to pierce, are less to be admired than peace-loving souls. Any fool can 'show his teeth,' as the word for 'quarrelling' means. But it takes a wise man, and a man whose spirit has been made meek by dwelling near God in Christ, to withhold the angry word, the quick retort. It is generally best to let the glove flung down lie where it is. There are better things to do than to squabble.

Verse 4 is a parable as well as a proverb. If a man sits by the fireside because the north wind is blowing, when he ought to be out in the field holding the plough with frost-nipped fingers, he will beg (or, perhaps, *seek for a crop*) in harvest, and will find nothing, when others are rejoicing in the 'slow result

of winter showers' and of their toilsome hours. So, in all life, if the fitting moments for preparation are neglected, late repentance avails nothing. The student who dawdles when he should be working, will be sure to fail when the examination comes on. It is useless to begin ploughing when your neighbours are driving their reaping machines into the fields. 'There is a time to sow, and a time to reap.' The law is inexorable for this life, and not less certainly so for the life to come. The virgins who cried in vain, 'Lord, Lord, open to us!' and were answered, 'Too late, too late, ye cannot enter now!' are sisters of the man who was hindered from ploughing because it was cold, and asked in vain for bread when harvest time had come. 'To-day, if ye will to hear His voice, harden not your hearts.'

The next proverb is a piece of shrewd common sense. It sets before us two men, one reticent, and the other skilful in worming out designs which he wishes to penetrate. The former is like a deep draw-well; the latter is like a man who lets down a bucket into it, and winds it up full. 'Still waters are deep.' The faculty of reading men may be abused to bad ends, but is worth cultivating, and may be allied to high aims, and serve to help in accomplishing these. It may aid good men in detecting evil, in knowing how to present God's truth to hearts that need it, in pouring comfort into closely shut spirits. Not only astute business men or politicians need it, but all who would help their fellows to love God and serve Him—preachers, teachers, and the like. And there would be more happy homes if parents and children tried to understand one another. We seldom dislike a man when we come to know him thoroughly. We cannot help him till we do.

The proverb in verse 6 is susceptible of different

renderings in the first clause. Delitzsch and others would translate, 'Almost every man meets a man who is gracious to him.' The contrast will then be between partial 'grace' or kindness, and thoroughgoing reliability or trustworthiness. The rendering of the Authorised and Revised Versions, on the other hand, makes the contrast between talk and reality, professions of goodwill and acts which come up to these. In either case, the saying is the bitter fruit of experience. Even charity, which 'believeth all things,' cannot but admit that soft words are more abundant than deeds which verify them. It is no breach of the law of love to open one's eyes to facts, and so to save oneself from taking paper money for gold, except at a heavy discount. Perhaps the reticence, noted in the previous proverb, led to the thought of a loose-tongued profession of kindness as a contrast. Neither the one nor the other is admirable. The practical conclusion from the facts in this proverb is double—do not take much heed of men's eulogiums on their own benevolence; do not trumpet your own praises. Caution and modesty are parts of Christian perfection.

The last saying points to the hereditary goodness which sometimes, for our comfort, we do see, as well as to the halo from a saintly parent which often surrounds his children. Note that there may be more than mere succession in time conveyed by the expression 'after him.' It may mean following in his footsteps. Such children are blessed, both in men's benedictions and in their own peaceful hearts. Weighty responsibilities lie upon the children of parents who have transmitted to them a revered name. A Christian's children are doubly bound to continue the parental tradition, and are doubly criminal if they depart from it. There is no

sadder sight than that of a godly father wailing over an ungodly son, unless it be that of the ungodly son who makes him wail. Absalom hanging by his curls in the oak-tree, and David groaning, 'My son, my son!' touch all hearts. Alas that the tragedy should be so often repeated in our homes to-day!

THE SLUGGARD IN HARVEST

'The sluggard will not plow by reason of the cold; therefore shall he beg in harvest, and have nothing.'—PROVERBS XX. 4.

LIKE all the sayings of this book, this is simply a piece of plain, practical common sense, intended to inculcate the lesson that men should diligently seize the opportunity whilst it is theirs. The sluggard is one of the pet aversions of the Book of Proverbs, which, unlike most other manuals of Eastern wisdom, has a profound reverence for honest work.

He is a great drone, for he prefers the chimney-corner to the field, even although it cannot have been very cold if the weather was open enough to admit of ploughing. And he is a great fool, too, for he buys his comfort at a very dear price, as do all men who live for to-day, and let to-morrow look out for itself.

But like most of the other sayings of this book, my text contains principles which are true in the highest regions of human life, for the laws which rule up there are not different from those which regulate the motions of its lower phases. Religion recognises the same practical common-sense principles that daily business does. I venture to take this as my text now, in addressing young people, because they have special need of, and special facilities for, the wisdom which it enjoins; and because the words only want to be turned

with their faces heavenwards in order to enforce the great appeal, the only one which it is worth my while to make, and worth your while to come here to listen to; the appeal to each of you, 'I beseech you, by the mercies of God, that ye yield yourselves to God' *now*.

My object, then, will be perhaps best accomplished if I simply ask you to look, first, at the principles involved in this quaint proverb; and, secondly, to apply them in one or two directions.

I. First, then, let us try to bring out the principles which are crystallised in this picturesque saying.

The first thought evidently is: present conduct determines future conditions. Life is a series of epochs, each of which has its destined work, and that being done, all is well; and that being left undone, all is ill.

Now, of course, in regard to many of the accidents of a man's condition, his conduct is only one, and by no means the most powerful, of the factors which settle them. The position which a man fills, the tasks which he has to perform, and the whole host of things which make up the externals of his life, depend upon far other conditions than any that he brings to them. But yet on the whole it is true that what a man does, and is, settles how he fares. And this is the mystical importance and awful solemnity of the most undistinguished moments and most trivial acts of this awful life of ours, that each of them has an influence on all that comes after, and may deflect our whole course into altogether different paths. It is not only the moments that we vulgarly and blindly call great which settle our condition, but it is the accumulation of the tiny ones; the small deeds, the unnoticed acts, which make up so large a portion of every man's life. It is these, after all, that are the most powerful in settling what we

shall be. There come to each of us supreme moments in our lives. Yes! and if in all the subordinate and insignificant moments we have not been getting ready for them, but have been nurturing dispositions and acquiring habits, and cultivating ways of acting and thinking which condemn us to fail beneath the requirements of the supreme moment, then it passes us by, and we gain nothing from it. Tiny mica flakes have built up the Matterhorn, and the minute acts of life after all, by their multiplicity, make up life to be what it is. 'Sand is heavy,' says this wise book of Proverbs. The aggregation of the minutest grains, singly so light that they would not affect the most delicate balance, weighs upon us with a weight 'heavy as frost, and deep almost as life.' The mystic significance of the trivialities of life is that in them we largely make destiny, and that in them we wholly make character.

And now, whilst this is true about all life, it is especially true about youth. You have facilities for moulding your being which some of us older men would give a great deal to have again for a moment, with our present knowledge and bitter experience. The lava that has solidified into hard rock with us is yet molten and plastic with you. You can, I was going to say, be anything you make up your minds to; and, within reasonable limits, the bold saying is true. 'Ask what thou wilt and it shall be given to thee' is what nature and Providence, almost as really as grace and Christ, say to every young man and woman, because you are the arbiters, not wholly, indeed, of your destiny, and are the architects, altogether, of your character, which is more.

And so I desire to lay upon your hearts this threadbare old truth, because you are living in the ploughing

time, and the harvest is months ahead. Whilst it is true that every day is the child of all the yesterdays, and the parent of all the to-morrows, it is also true that life has its predominant colouring, varying at different epochs, and that for you, though you are largely inheriting, even now, the results of your past, brief as it is, still more largely is the future, the plastic future, in your hands, to be shaped into such forms as you will. 'The child is father of the man,' and the youth has the blessed prerogative of standing before the mouldable to-morrow, and possessing a nature still capable of being cast into an almost infinite variety of form.

But then, not only do you stand with special advantages for making yourselves what you will, but you specially need to be reminded of the terrible importance and significance of each moment. For this is the very irony of human life, that we seldom awake to the sense of its importance till it is nearly ended, and that the period when reflection would avail the most is precisely the period when it is the least strong and habitual. What is the use of an old man like me thinking about what he could make of life if he had it to do over again, as compared with the advantage of your doing it? Yet I dare say that for once that you think thus, my contemporaries do it fifty times. So, not to abate one jot of your buoyancy, not to cast any shadow over joys and hopes, but to lift you to a sense of the blessed possibilities of your position, I want to lay this principle of my text upon your consciences, and to beseech you to try to keep it operatively in mind—you are making yourselves, and settling your destiny, by every day of your plastic youth.

There is another principle as clear in my text—viz., the easy road is generally the wrong one. The

sluggard was warmer at the fireside than he would be in the field with his plough in the north wind, and so he stopped there. There are always obstacles in the way of noble life. It is always easier, as flesh judges, to live ignobly than to live as Jesus Christ would have us live. 'Endure hardness' is the commandment to all who would be soldiers of any great cause, and would not fling away their lives in low self-indulgence. If a man is going to be anything worth being, or to do anything worth doing, he must start with, and adhere to this, 'to scorn delights and live laborious days.' And only then has he a chance of rising above the fat dull weed that rots in Lethe's stream, and of living anything like the life that it becomes him to live.

Be sure of this, dear young friends, that self-denial and rigid self-control, in its two forms, of stopping your ears to the attractions of lower pleasures, and of cheerily encountering difficulties, is an indispensable condition of any life which shall at the last yield a harvest worth the gathering, and not destined to be

'Cast as rubbish to the void,
When God hath made the pile complete.'

Never allow yourselves to be turned away from the plain path of duty by any difficulties. Never allow yourselves to be guided in your choice of a road by the consideration that the turf is smooth, and the flowers by the side of it sweet. Remember, the sluggard would have been warmer, with a wholesome warmth, at the ploughtail than cowering in the chimney corner. And the things that seem to be difficulties and hardships only need to be fronted to yield, like the east wind in its season, good results in bracing and hardening. Fix it in your minds that nothing worth doing is done but at the cost of difficulty and toil.

That is a lesson that this generation wants, even more than some that have lived. I suppose it is one of the temptations of older men to look askance upon the amusements of younger ones, but I cannot help lifting up here one word of earnest appeal to the young men and women of this congregation, and beseeching them, as they value the nobleness of their own lives, and their power of doing any real good, to beware of what seems to me the altogether extravagant and excessive love, and following after, of mere amusement which characterises this day to so large an extent. Better toil than such devotion to mere relaxation.

The last principle here is that the season let slip is gone for ever. Whether my text, in its second picture, intends us to think of the sluggard when the harvest came as 'begging' from his neighbours; or whether, as is possibly the construction of the Hebrew, it simply means to describe him as going out into his field, and looking at it, and asking for the harvest and seeing nothing there but weeds, the lesson it conveys is the same—the old, old lesson, so threadbare that I should be almost ashamed of taking up your time with it unless I believed that you did not lay it to heart as you should. Opportunity is bald behind, and must be grasped by the forelock. Life is full of tragic *might-have-beens*. No regret, no remorse, no self-accusation, no clear recognition that I was a fool will avail one jot. The time for ploughing is past; you cannot stick the share into the ground when you should be wielding the sickle. 'Too late' is the saddest of human words. And, my brother, as the stages of our lives roll on, unless each is filled as it passes with the discharge of the duties, and the appropriation of the benefits which it brings, then, to all eternity, that moment will never

return, and the sluggard may beg in harvest that he may have the chance to plough once more, and have none. The student that has spent the term in indolence, perhaps dissipation, has no time to get up his subject when he is in the examination-room, with the paper before him. And life, and nature, and God's law, which is the Christian expression for the heathen one of *nature*, are stern taskmasters, and demand that the duty shall be done in its season or left undone for ever.

II. In the second place, let me, just in a few words, carry the lamp of these principles of my text and flash its rays upon one or two subjects.

Let me say a word, first, about the lowest sphere to which my text applies. I referred at the beginning of this discourse to this proverb as simply an inculcation of the duty of honest work, and of the necessity of being wide awake to opportunities in our daily work. Now, the most of you young men, and many of you young women, are destined for ordinary trades, professions, walks in commerce; and I do not suppose it to be beneath the dignity of the pulpit to say this: Do not trust to any way of getting on by dodges or speculation, or favour, or anything but downright hard work. Don't shirk difficulties, don't try to put the weight of the work upon some colleague or other, that you may have an easier life of it. Set your backs to your tasks, and remember that 'in all labour there is profit'; and whether the profit comes to you in the shape of advancement, position, promotion in your offices, partnerships perhaps, wealth, and the like, or no, the profit lies in the work. Honest toil is the key to pleasure.

Then, let me apply the text in a somewhat higher direction. Carry these principles with you in the cultivation of that important part of yourself—your

intellects. What would some of us old students give if we had the flexibility, the power of assimilating new truth, the retentive memories, that you young people have? Some of you, perhaps, are students by profession; I should like all of you to make a conscience of making the best of your brains, as God has given them to you, a trust. 'The sluggard will not plough by reason of the cold.' The dawdler will read no books that tax his intellect, therefore shall he beg in harvest and have nothing. Amidst all the flood of feeble, foolish, flaccid literature with which we are afflicted at this day, I wonder how many of you young men and women ever set yourselves to some great book or subject that you cannot understand without effort. Unless you do you are not faithful stewards of the supreme gift of God to you of that great faculty which apprehends and lives upon truth. So remember the sluggard by his fireside; and do you get out with your plough.

Again I say, apply these principles to a higher work still—that of the formation of character. Nothing will come to you noble, great, elevating, in that direction, unless it is sought, and sought with toil.

'In woods, in waves, in wars, she wont to dwell,
And will be found with peril and with pain;
Before her gate high Heaven did sweat ordain,
And wakeful watches ever to abide.'

Wisdom and truth, and all their elevating effects upon human character, require absolutely for their acquirement effort and toil. You have the opportunity still. As I said a moment ago—you may mould yourselves into noble forms. But in the making of character we have to work as a painter in fresco does, with a swift brush on the plaster while it is wet. It sets and hardens in an hour. And men drift into habits which

become tyrannies and dominant before they know where they are. Don't let yourselves be shaped by accident, by circumstance. Remember that you can build yourselves up into forms of beauty by the help of the grace of God, and that for such building there must be the diligent labour and the wise clutching at opportunity and understanding of the times which my text suggests.

And, lastly, let these principles applied to religion teach us the wisdom and necessity of beginning the Christian life at the earliest moment. I am by no means prepared to say that the extreme tragedy of my text can ever be wrought out in regard to the religious experience of any man here on earth, for I believe that at any moment in his career, however faultful and stained his past has been, and however long and obstinate has been his continuance in evil, a man may turn himself to Jesus Christ, and beg, and not in vain, nor ever find 'nothing' there.

But whilst all that is quite true, I want you, dear young friends, to lay this to heart, that if you do not yield yourselves to Jesus Christ now, in your early days, and take Him for your Saviour, and rest your souls upon Him, and then take Him for your Captain and Commander, for your Pattern and Example, for your Companion and your Aim, you will lose what you can never make up by any future course. You lose years of blessedness, of peaceful society with Him, of illumination and inspiration. You lose all the sweetness of the days which you spend away from Him. And if at the end you did come to Him, you would have one regret, deep and permanent, that you had not gone to Him before. If you put off, as some of you are putting off, what you know you ought to do—namely, give your

hearts to Jesus Christ and become His—think of what you are laying up for yourselves thereby. You get much that it would be gain to lose—bitter memories defiled imaginations, stings of conscience, habits that it will be very hard to break, and the sense of having wasted the best part of your lives, and having but the fag end to bring to Him. And if you put off, as some of you are disposed to do, think of the risk you run. It is very unlikely that susceptibilities will remain if they are trifled with. You remember that Felix trembled once, and sent for Paul often; but we never hear that he trembled any more. And it is quite possible, and quite likely, more likely than not, that you will never be as near being a Christian again as you are now, if you turn away from the impressions that are made upon you at this moment, and stifle the half-formed resolution.

But there is a more solemn thought still. This life as a whole is to the future life as the ploughing time is to the harvest, and there are awful words in Scripture which seem to point in the same direction in reference to the irrevocable and irreversible issue of neglected opportunities on earth, as this proverb does in regard to the ploughing and harvests of this life.

I dare not conceal what seems to me the New Testament confirmation and deepening of the solemn words of our text, 'He shall beg in harvest and have nothing,' by the Master's words, 'Many shall say to me in that day, Lord! Lord! and I will say, I never knew you.' The five virgins who rubbed their sleepy eyes and asked for oil when the master was at hand got none, and when they besought, 'Lord! Lord! open to us,' all the answer was, 'Too late! too late! ye cannot enter now.' Now, while it is called day, harden not your hearts.

BREAD AND GRAVEL

'Bread of deceit is sweet to a man; but afterwards his mouth shall be filled with gravel.'—PROVERBS XX. 17.

'BREAD of deceit' is a somewhat ambiguous phrase, which may mean either of two things, and perhaps means both. It may either mean any good obtained by deceit, or good which deceives in its possession. In the former signification it would appear to have reference primarily to unjustly gotten gain, while in the latter it has a wider meaning and applies to all the worthless treasures and lying delights of life. The metaphor is full of homely vigour, and the contrast between the sweet bread and the gravel that fills the mouth and breaks the teeth, carries a solemn lesson which is perpetually insisted upon in this book of Proverbs, and confirmed in every man's experience.

I. The first lesson here taught is the perpetuity of the most transient actions.

We are tempted to think that a deed done is done with, and to grasp at momentary pleasure, and ignore its abiding consequences. But of all the delusions by which men are blinded to the true solemnity of life none is more fatal than that which ignores the solemn 'afterwards' that has to be taken into account. For, whatever issues in outward life our actions may have, they have all a very real influence on their doers; each of them tends to modify character, to form habits, to drag after itself a whole trail of consequences. Each strikes inwards and works outwards. The whole of a life may be set forth in the pregnant figure, 'A sower went forth to sow,' and 'Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.' The seed may lie long dormant,

but the green shoots will appear in due time, and pass through all the stages of 'first the blade, and then the ear, and after that the full corn in the ear.' The sower has to become the reaper, and the reaper has to eat of the bread made from the product of the long past sowing. Shall *we* have to reap a harvest of poisonous tares, or of wholesome wheat? 'If 'twere done when 'tis done, 'twere well it were done quickly'; but since it begins to do when 'tis done, it were often better that it were not done at all. A momentary pause to ask ourselves when tempted to evil, 'And what then?' would burst not a few of the painted bubbles after which we often chase.

Is there any reason to suppose that these permanent consequences of our transient actions are confined in their operation to this life? Does not such a present, which is mainly the continuous result of the whole past, seem at least to prophesy and guarantee a similar future? Most of us, I suppose, believe in the life continuous through and after death retributive in a greater degree than life here. Whatever changes may be involved in the laying aside of the 'earthly house of this tabernacle,' it seems folly to suppose that in it we lay aside the consequences of our past inwrought into our very selves. Surely wisdom suggests that we try to take into view the whole scope of our actions, and to carry our vision as far as the consequences reach. We should all be wiser and better if we thought more of the 'afterwards,' whether in its partial form in the present, or in its solemn completion in the future beyond.

II. The bitterness of what is sweet and wrong.

There is no need to deny that 'bread of deceit is sweet to a man.' There is a certain pleasure in a lie,

and the taste of the bread purchased by it is not embittered because it has been bought by deceit. If we succeed in getting the good which any strong desire hungers after, the gratification of the desire ministers pleasure. If a man is hungry, it matters not to his hunger how he has procured the bread which he devours. And so with all forms of good which appeal to sense. The sweetness of the thing desired and obtained is more subtle, but not less real, if it nourishes some inclination or taste of a higher nature. But such sweetness in its very essence is momentary, and even, whilst being masticated, 'bread of deceit' turns into gravel; and a mouthful of it breaks the teeth, excoriates the gums, interferes with breathing, and ministers no nourishment. The metaphor has but too familiar illustrations in the experience of us all. How often have we flattered ourselves with the thought, 'If I could but get this or that, how happy I should be'? How often when we got it have we been as happy as we expected? We had forgotten the voice of conscience, which may be overborne for a moment, but begins to speak more threateningly when its prohibitions have been neglected; we had forgotten that there is no satisfying our hungry desires with 'bread of deceit,' but that they grow much faster than it can be presented to them; we had forgotten the evil that was strengthened in us when it has been fed; we had forgotten that the remembrance of past delights often becomes a present sorrow and shame; we had forgotten avenging consequences of many sorts which follow surely in the train of sweet satisfactions which are wrong.

So, even in this life nothing keeps its sweetness which is wrong, and nothing which is sweet and wrong avoids

a *tang* of intensest bitterness 'afterwards.' And all that bitterness will be increased in another world, if there is another, when God gives us to read the book of our lives which we ourselves have written. Many a page that records past sweetness will then be felt to be written, 'within and without,' with lamentation and woe.

All bitterness of what is sweet and wrong makes it certain that sin is the stupidest, as well as the wickedest, thing that a man can do.

III. The abiding sweetness of true bread.

In a subordinate sense, the true bread may be taken as meaning our own deeds inspired by love of God and approved by conscience. They may often be painful to do, but the pain merges into calm pleasure, and conscience whispers a foretaste of heaven's 'Well done! good and faithful servant.' The roll may be bitter to the lips, but, eaten, becomes sweet as honey; whereas the world's bread is sweet at first but bitter at last. The highest wisdom and the most exacting conscience absolutely coincide in that which they prescribe, and Scripture has the warrant of universal experience in proclaiming that sin in its subtler and more refined forms, as well as in its grosser, is a gigantic mistake, and the true wisdom and reasonable regard for one's own interest alike point in the same direction,—to a life based on the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, as being the life which yields the happiest results to-day and perpetual bliss hereafter. But let us not forget that in the highest sense Christ Himself is the 'true bread that cometh down from heaven.' He may be bitter at first, being eaten with tears of penitence and painful efforts at conquering sin, but even in the first bitterness there is sweetness beyond all the earth

can give. He 'spreads a table before us in the presence of our enemies,' and the bread which He gives tastes as the manna of old did, like wafers made of honey. Only perverted appetites loathe this light bread and prefer the strong-favoured leeks and garlies of Egypt. They who sit at the table in the wilderness will finally sit at the table prepared in the kingdom of the heavens.

A CONDENSED GUIDE FOR LIFE

'My son, if thine heart be wise, my heart shall rejoice, even mine. 16. Yea, my reins shall rejoice, when thy lips speak right things. 17. Let not thine heart envy sinners: but be thou in the fear of the Lord all the day long. 18. For surely there is an end; and thine expectation shall not be cut off. 19. Hear thou, my son, and be wise, and guide thine heart in the way. 20. Be not among winebibbers; among riotous eaters of flesh: 21. For the drunkard and the glutton shall come to poverty: and drowsiness shall clothe a man with rags. 22. Harken unto thy father that begat thee, and despise not thy mother when she is old. 23. Buy the truth and sell it not; also wisdom, and instruction, and understanding.'—PROVERBS xxiii. 15-23.

THE precepts of this passage may be said to sum up the teaching of the whole Book of Proverbs. The essentials of moral character are substantially the same in all ages, and these ancient advices fit very close to the young lives of this generation. The gospel has, no doubt, raised the standard of morals, and, in many respects, altered the conception and perspective of virtues; but its great distinction lies, not so much in the novelty of its commandments as in the new motives and powers to obey them. Reverence for parents and teachers, the habitual 'fear of the Lord,' temperance, eager efforts to win and retain 'the truth,' have always been recognised as duties; but there is a long weary distance between recognition and practice, and he who draws inspiration from Jesus Christ will have strength to traverse it, and to do and be what he knows that he should.

The passage may be broken up into four parts, which, taken together, are a young life's directory of conduct which is certain to lead to peace.

I. There is, first, an appeal to filial affection, and an unveiling of paternal sympathy (verses 15, 16). The paternal tone characteristic of the Book of Proverbs is most probably regarded as that of a teacher addressing his disciples as his children. But the glimpse of the teacher's heart here given may well apply to parents too, and ought to be true of all who can influence other and especially young hearts. Little power attends advices which are not sweetened by manifest love. Many a son has been kept back from evil by thinking, 'What would my mother say?' and many a sound admonition has been nothing but sound, because the tone of it betrayed that the giver did not much care whether it was taken or not.

A true teacher must have his heart engaged in his lessons, and must impress his scholars with the conviction that their failure drives a knife into it, and their acceptance of them brings him purest joy. On the other hand, the disciple, and still more the child, must have a singularly cold nature who does not respond to loving solicitude and does not care whether he wounds or gladdens the heart which pours out its love and solicitude over him. May we not see shining through this loving appeal a truth in reference to the heart of the great Father and Teacher, who, in the depths of His divine blessedness, has no greater joy than that His children should walk in the truth? God's heart is glad when man's is wise.

Note, also, the wide general expression for goodness—a wise heart, lips speaking right things. The former is source, the latter stream. Only a pure fountain will

send forth sweet waters. 'If thy heart become wise' is the more correct rendering, implying that there is no inborn wisdom, but that it must be made ours by effort. We *are* foolish; we *become* wise.

What the writer means by wisdom he will tell us presently. Here he lets us see that it is a good to be attained by appropriate means. It is the foundation of 'right' speech. Nothing is more remarkable than the solemn importance which Scripture attaches to words, even more, we might almost say than to deeds, therein reversing the usual estimate of their relative value. Putting aside the cases of insincerity, falsehood, and the like, a man's speech is a truer transcript of himself than his deeds, because less hindered and limited by externals. The most precious wine drips from the grapes by their own weight in the vat, without a turn of the screw. 'By thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.' 'God's great gift of speech abused' is one of the commonest, least considered, and most deadly sins.

II. We have next the one broad precept with its sure reward, which underlies all goodness (verses 17, 18). The supplement 'be thou,' in the second clause of verse 17, obscures the close connection of clauses. It is better to regard the verb of the first clause as continued in the second. Thus the one precept is set forth negatively and positively: 'Strive not after [that is, seek not to imitate or be associated with] sinners, but after the fear of the Lord.' The heart so striving becomes wise. So, then, wisdom is not the result of cultivating the intellect, but of educating the desires and aspirations. It is moral and religious, rather than simply intellectual. The magnificent personification of Wisdom at the beginning of the book influences the

subsequent parts, and the key to understanding that great conception is, 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom.' The Greek goddess of Wisdom, noble as she is, is of the earth earthy when contrasted with that sovereign figure. Pallas Athene, with her clear eyes and shining armour, is poor beside the Wisdom of the Book of Proverbs, who dwelt with God 'or ever the earth was,' and comes to men with loving voice and hands laden with the gifts of 'durable riches and righteousness.'

He is the wise man who fears God with the fear which has no torment and is compact of love and reverence. He is on the way to become wise whose seeking heart turns away from evil and evil men, and feels after God, as the vine tendrils after a stay, or as the sunflower turns to the light. For such whole-hearted desire after the one supreme good there must be resolute averting of desire from 'sinners.' In this world full of evil there will be no vigorous longing for good and God, unless there be determined abstention from the opposite. We have but a limited quantity of energy, and if it is frittered away on multifarious creatures, none will be left to consecrate to God. There are lakes which discharge their waters at both ends, sending one stream east to the Atlantic and one west to the Pacific; but the heart cannot direct its issues of life in that fashion. They must be banked up if they are to run deep and strong. 'All the current of my being' must 'set to thee' if my tiny trickle is to reach the great ocean, to be lost in which is blessedness.

And such energy of desire and direction is not to be occasional, but 'all the day long.' It is possible to make life an unbroken seeking after and communion with God, even while plunged in common tasks and small

cares. It is possible to approximate indefinitely to that ideal of continual 'dwelling in the house of the Lord'; and without some such approximation there will be little realising of the Lord, sought by fits and starts, and then forgotten in the hurry of business or pleasure. A photographic plate exposed for hours will receive the picture of far-off stars which would never show on one exposed for a few minutes.

The writer is sure that such desires will be satisfied, and in verse 18 says so. The 'reward' (Rev. Ver.) of which he is sure is the outcome of the life of such seekers after God. It does not necessarily refer to the future after death, though that may be included in it. But what is meant is that no seeking after the fear of the Lord shall be in vain. There is a tacit emphasis on 'thy,' contrasting the sure fulfilment of hopes set on God with the as sure 'cutting off' of those mistakenly fixed upon creatures and vanities. Psalm xxxvii. 38, has the same word here rendered 'reward,' and declares that 'the future [or reward] of the wicked shall be cut off.' The great fulfilment of this assurance is reserved for the life beyond; but even here among all disappointments and hopes of which fulfilment is so often disappointment also, it remains true that the one striving which cannot be fruitless is striving for more of God, and the one hope which is sure to be realised, and is better when realised than expected, is the hope set on Him. Surely, then, the certainty that if we delight ourselves in God He will give us the desires of our hearts, is a good argument, and should be with us an operative motive for directing desire and effort away from earth and towards Him.

III. Special precepts as to the control of the animal nature follow in verses 19-21. First, note that general

one of verse 19, 'Guide thine heart in the way.' In most general terms, the necessity of self-government is laid down. There is a 'way' in which we should be content to travel. It is a definite path, and feet have to be kept from straying aside to wide wastes on either hand. Limitation, the firm suppression of appetites, the coercing of these if they seek to draw aside, are implied in the very conception of 'the way.' And a man must take the upper hand of himself, and, after all other guidance, must be his own guide; for God guides us by enabling us to guide ourselves.

Temperance in the wider sense of the word is prominent among the virtues flowing from fear of the Lord, and is the most elementary instance of 'guiding the heart.' Other forms of self-restraint in regard to animal appetites are spoken of in the context, but here the two of drunkenness and gluttony are bracketed together. They are similarly coupled in Deuteronomy xxi. 20, in the formula of accusation which parents are to bring against a degenerate son. Allusion to that passage is probable here, especially as the other crime mentioned in it—namely, refusal to 'hear' parental reproof—is warned against in verse 22. The picture, then, here is that of a prodigal son, and we have echoes of it in the great parable which paints first riotous living, and then poverty and misery.

Drunkenness had obviously not reached the dimensions of a national curse in the date when this lesson was written. We should not put over-eating side by side with it. But its ruinous consequences were plain then, and the bitter experience of England and America repeats on a larger scale the old lesson that the most productive source of poverty, wretchedness, rags, and vice, is drink. Judges and social reformers

of all sorts concur in that now, though it has taken fifty years to hammer it into the public conscience. Perhaps in another fifty or so society may have succeeded in drawing the not very obscure inference that total abstinence and prohibition are wise. At any rate, they who seek after the fear of the Lord should draw it, and act on it.

IV. The last part is in verses 22 and 23. The appeal to filial duty cannot here refer to disciple and teacher, but to child and parents. It does not stand as an isolated precept, but as underscoring the important one which follows. But a word must be spared for it. The habits of ancient days gave a place to the father and mother which modern family life woefully lacks, and suffers in many ways for want of. Many a parent in these days of slack control and precocious independence might say, 'If I be a father, where is mine honour?' There was perhaps not enough of confidence between parent and child in former days, and authority on the one hand and submission on the other too much took the place of love; but nowadays the danger is all the other way—and it is a very real danger.

But the main point here is the earnest exhortation of verse 23, which, like that to the fear of the Lord, sums up all duty in one. The 'truth' is, like 'wisdom,' moral and religious, and not merely intellectual. 'Wisdom' is subjective, the quality or characteristic of the devout soul; 'truth' is objective, and may also be defined as the declared will of God. The possession of truth is wisdom. 'The entrance of Thy words giveth light.' It makes wise the simple. There is, then, such a thing as 'the truth' accessible to us. We can know it, and are not to be for ever groping amid more or less likely guesses, but may rest in the certitude that we have hold

of foundation facts. For us, the truth is incarnate in Jesus, as He has solemnly asserted. That truth we shall, if we are wise, 'buy,' by shunning no effort, sacrifice, or trouble needed to secure it.

In the lower meanings of the word, our passage should fire us all, and especially the young, to strain every muscle of the soul in order to make truth for the intellect our own. The exhortation is needed in this day of adoration of money and material good. Nobler and wiser far the young man who lays himself out to know than he who is engrossed with the hungry desire to have! But in the highest region of truth, the buying is 'without money and without price,' and all that we can give in exchange is ourselves. We buy the truth when we know that we cannot earn it, and forsaking self-trust and self-pleasing, consent to receive it as a free gift. 'Sell it not,'—let no material good or advantage, no ease, slothfulness, or worldly success, tempt you to cast it away; for its 'fruit is better than gold,' and its 'revenue than choice silver.' We shall make a bad bargain if we sell it for anything beneath the stars; for 'wisdom is better than rubies,' and he has been cheated in the transaction who has given up 'the truth' and got instead 'the whole world.'

THE AFTERWARDS AND OUR HOPE

'Be thou in the fear of the Lord all the day long. 18. For surely there is an end and thine expectation shall not be cut off.'—PROVERBS xxiii. 17, 18.

THE Book of Proverbs seldom looks beyond the limits of the temporal, but now and then the mists lift and a wider horizon is disclosed. Our text is one of these exceptional instances, and is remarkable, not only as expressing confidence in the future, but as expressing

it in a very striking way. 'Surely there is an end,' says our Authorised Version, substituting in the margin, for end, 'reward.' The latter word is placed in the text of the Revised Version. But neither 'end' nor 'reward' conveys the precise idea. The word so translated literally means 'something that comes after.' So it is the very opposite of 'end,' it is really that which lies beyond the end—the 'sequel,' or the 'future'—as the margin of the Revised Version gives alternatively, or, more simply still, the afterwards. Surely there is an afterwards behind the end. And then the proverb goes on to specify one aspect of that afterwards: 'Thine expectation'—or, better, because more simply, thy hope—shall not be cut off. And then, upon these two convictions that there is, if I might so say, an afterclap, and that it is the time and the sphere in which the fairest hopes that a man can paint to himself shall be surpassed by the reality, it builds the plain partial exhortation: 'Be thou in the fear of the Lord all the day long.'

So then, we have three things here, the certainty of the afterwards, the immortality of hope consequent thereon, and the bearing of these facts on the present.

I. The certainty of the hereafter.

Now, this Book of Proverbs, as I have said in the great collection of popular sayings which makes the bulk of it, has no enthusiasm, no poetry, no mysticism. It has religion, and it has a very pure and lofty morality, but, for the most part, it deals with maxims of worldly prudence, and sometimes with cynical ones, and represents, on the whole, the wisdom of the market-place, and the 'man in the street.' But now and then, as I have said, we hear strains of a higher mood. My text, of course, might be watered down and narrowed so as

to point only to sequels to deeds realised in this life. And then it would be teaching us simply the very much needed lessons that even in this life, 'Whatever a man soweth that shall he also reap.' But it seems to me that we are entitled to see here, as in one or two other places in the Book of Proverbs, a dim anticipation of a future life beyond the grave. I need not trouble you with quoting parallel passages which are sown thinly up and down the book, but I venture to take the words in the wider sense to which I have referred.

Now, the question comes to be, where did the coiners of Proverbs, whose main interest was in the obvious maxims of a prudential morality, get this conviction? They did not get it from any lofty experience of communion with God, like that which in the seventy-third Psalm marks the very high-water mark of Old Testament faith in regard to a future life, where the Psalmist finds himself so completely blessed and well in present fellowship with God, that he must needs postulate its eternal continuance, and just because he has made God the portion of his heart, and is holding fellowship with Him, is sure that nothing can intervene to break that sweet communion. They did not get it from any clear definite revelation, such as we have in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which has made that future life far more than an inference for us, but they got it from thinking over the facts of this present life as they appeared to them, looked at from the standpoint of a belief in God, and in righteousness. And so they represent to us the impression that is made upon a man's mind, if he has the 'eye that hath kept watch o'er man's mortality,' that is made by the facts of this earthly life—viz. that it is so full of onward-looking, prophetic aspect, so manifestly and tragically, and yet

wonderfully and hopefully, incomplete and fragmentary in itself, that there must be something beyond in order to explain, in order to vindicate, the life that now is. And that aspect of fragmentary incompleteness is what I would insist upon for a moment now.

You sometimes see a row of houses, the end one of them has, in its outer gable wall, bricks protruding here and there, and holes for chimney-pieces that are yet to be put in. And just as surely as that external wall says that the row is half built, and there are some more tenements to be added to it, so surely does the life that we now live here, in all its aspects almost, bear upon itself the stamp that it, too, is but initial and preparatory. You sometimes see, in the book-seller's catalogue, a book put down 'volume one; all that is published.' That is our present life—volume one, all that is published. Surely there is going to be a sequel, volume two. Volume two is due, and will come, and it will be the continuation of volume one.

What is the meaning of the fact that of all the creatures on the face of the earth only you and I, and our brethren and sisters, do not find in our environment enough for our powers? What is the meaning of the fact that, whilst 'foxes have holes' where they curl themselves up, and they are at rest, 'and the birds of the air have roosting-places,' where they tuck their heads beneath their wings and sleep, the 'son of man' hath not where to lay his head, but looks round upon the earth and says, 'The earth, O Lord, is full of Thy mercy. I am a stranger on the earth.' What is the meaning of it? Here is the meaning of it: 'Surely there is a hereafter.'

What is the meaning of the fact that lodged in men's natures there lies that strange power of painting to

themselves things that are not as though they were? So that minds and hearts go out wandering through Eternity, and having longings and possibilities which nothing beneath the stars can satisfy, or can develop? The meaning of it is this: Surely there is a hereafter. The man that wrote the book of Ecclesiastes, in his sceptical moment ere he had attained to his last conclusion, says, in a verse that is mistranslated in our rendering, 'He hath set Eternity in their hearts, therefore the misery of man is great upon him.' That is true, because the root of all our unrest and dissatisfaction is that we need God, and God in Eternity, in order that we may be at rest. But whilst on the one hand 'therefore the misery of man is great upon him,' on the other hand, because Eternity is in our hearts, therefore there is the answer to the longings, the adequate sphere for the capacities in that great future, and in the God that fills it. You go into the quarries left by reason of some great convulsion or disaster, by forgotten races, and you will find there half excavated and rounded pillars still adhering to the matrix of the rock from which they were being hewn. Such unfinished abortions are all human lives if, when Death drops its curtain, there is an end.

But, brethren, God does not so clumsily disproportion His creatures and their place. God does not so cruelly put into men longings that have no satisfaction, and desires which never can be filled, as that there should not be, beyond the gulf, the fair land of the hereafter. Every human life obviously has in it, up to the very end, the capacity for progress. Every human life, up to the very end, has been educated and trained, and that, surely, for something. There may be masters in workshops who take apprentices, and teach them their

trade during the years that are needed, and then turn round and say, 'I have no work for you, so you must go and look for it somewhere else.' That is not how God does. When He has trained His apprentices He gives them work to do. Surely there is a hereafter.

But that is only part of what is involved in this thought. It is not only a state subsequent to the present, but it is a state consequent on the present, and the outcome of it. The analogy of our earthly life avails here. To-day is the child of all the yesterdays, and the yesterdays and to-day are the parent of to-morrow. The past, our past, has made us what we are in the present, and what we are in the present is making us what we shall be in the future. And when we pass out of this life we pass out, notwithstanding all changes, the same men as we were. There may be much on the surface changed, there will be much taken away, thank God! dropped, necessarily, by the cessation of the corporeal frame, and the connection into which it brings us with things of sense. There will be much added, God only knows how much, but the core of the man will remain untouched. 'We all are changed by still degrees,' and suddenly at last 'All but the basis of the evil.' And so we carry ourselves with us into that future life, and, 'what a man soweth, that shall he also reap.' Oh that they were wise, that they understood this, that they would consider their afterward!

II. Now, secondly, my text suggests the immortality of hope. 'Thine expectation'—or rather, as I said, 'thy hope'—'shall not be cut off.' This is a characteristic of that hereafter. What a wonderful saying that is which also occurs in this Book of Proverbs, 'The righteous hath hope in his death.' Ah! we all know how swiftly, as years increase, the things to hope for

diminish, and how, as we approach the end, less and less do our imaginations go out into the possibilities of the sorrowing future. And when the end comes, if there is no afterwards, the dying man's hopes must necessarily die before he does. If when we pass into the darkness we are going into a cave with no outlet at the other end, then there is no hope, and you may write over it Dante's grim word: 'All hope abandon, ye who enter here.' But let in that thought, 'surely there is an afterwards,' and the enclosed cave becomes a rock-passage, in which one can see the arch of light at the far end of the tunnel; and as one passes through the gloom, the eye can travel on to the pale radiance beyond, and anticipate the ampler ether, the diviner air, 'the brighter constellations burning, mellow moons and happy stars,' that await us there. 'The righteous hath hope in his death.' 'Thine expectation shall not be cut off.'

But, further, that conviction of the afterward opens up for us a condition in which imagination is surpassed by the wondrous reality. Here, I suppose, nobody ever had all the satisfaction out of a fulfilled hope that he expected. The fish is always a great deal larger and heavier when we see it in the water than when it is lifted out and scaled. And I suppose that, on the whole, perhaps as much pain as pleasure comes from the hopes which are illusions far more often than they are realities. They serve their purpose in whirling us along the path of life and in stimulating effort, but they do not do much more.

But there does come a time, if you believe that there is an afterwards, when all we desired and painted to ourselves of possible good for our craving spirits shall be felt to be but a pale reflex of the reality, like the

light of some unrisen sun on the snowfields, and we shall have to say 'the half was not told to us.'

And, further, if that afterwards is of the sort that we, through Jesus Christ and His resurrection and glory, know to be, then all through the timeless eternity hope will be our guide. For after each fresh influx of blessedness and knowledge we shall have to say 'it doth not yet appear what we shall be.' 'Thus now abideth'—and not only now, but then and eternally—'these three—faith, hope, and charity,' and hope will never be cut off through all the stretch of that great afterwards.

III. And now, finally, notice the bearing of all this on the daily present.

'Be thou in the fear of the Lord all the day long.' The conviction of the hereafter, and the blessed vision of hopes fulfilled, are not the only reasons for that exhortation. A great deal of harm has been done, I am afraid, by well-meaning preachers who have drawn the bulk of their strongest arguments to persuade men to Christian faith from the thought of a future life. Why, if there were no future, it would be just as wise, just as blessed, just as incumbent upon us to 'be in the fear of the Lord all the day long.' But seeing that there is that future, and seeing that only in it will hope rise to fruition, and yet subsist as longing, surely there comes to us a solemn appeal to 'be in the fear of the Lord all the day long,' which being turned into Christian language, is to live by habitual faith, in communion with, and love and obedience to, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Surely, surely the very climax and bad eminence of folly is shutting the eyes to that future that we all have to face; and to live here, as some of you are

doing, ignoring it and God, and cribbing, cabining, and confining all our thoughts within the narrow limits of the things present and visible. For to live so, as our text enjoins, is the sure way, and the only way, to make these great hopes realities for ourselves.

Brethren, that afterwards has two sides to it. The prophet Malachi, in almost his last words, has a magnificent apocalypse of what he calls 'the day of the Lord,' which he sets forth as having a double aspect. On the one hand, it is lurid as a furnace, and burns up the wicked root and branch. I saw a forest fire this last autumn, and the great pine-trees stood there for a moment pyramids of flame, and then came down with a crash. So that hereafter will be to godless men. And on the other side, that 'day of the Lord' in the prophet's vision was radiant with the freshness and dew and beauty of morning, and the Sun of Righteousness arose with healing in his wings. Which of the two is it going to be to us? We have all to face it. We cannot alter that fact, but we can settle how we shall face it. It will be to either the fulfilment of blessed hope, the 'appearance of the glory of the great God and our Saviour,' or else, as is said in this same Book of Proverbs: 'The hope of the godless' shall be like one of those water plants, the papyrus or the flag, which, when the water is taken away, 'withereth up before any other herb.' It is for us to determine whether the afterwards that we must enter upon shall be the land in which our hopes shall blossom and fruit, and blossom again immortally, or whether we shall leave behind us, with all the rest that we would fain keep, the possibility of anticipating any good. 'Surely there is an afterwards,' and if thou wilt 'be in the fear of the Lord all the day long,' then for evermore 'thy hope shall not be cut off.'

THE PORTRAIT OF A DRUNKARD

'Who hath woe? who hath sorrow? who hath contentions? who hath babbling? who hath wounds without cause? who hath redness of eyes? 30. They that tarry long at the wine; they that go to seek mixed wine. 31. Look not thou upon the wine when it is red, when it giveth his colour in the cup, when it moveth itself aright. 32. At the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder. 33. Thine eyes shall behold strange women, and thine heart shall utter perverse things. 34. Yea, thou shalt be as he that lieth down in the midst of the sea, or as he that lieth upon the top of a mast. 35. They have stricken me, shalt thou say, and I was not sick; they have beaten me, and I felt it not: when shall I awake? I will seek it yet again.'—PROVERBS xxiii. 29-35.

THIS vivid picture of the effects of drunkenness leaves its sinfulness and its wider consequences out of sight, and fixes attention on the sorry spectacle which a man makes of himself in body and mind when he 'puts an enemy into his mouth to steal away his brains.' Disgust and ridicule are both expressed. The writer would warn his 'son' by impressing the ugliness and ludicrousness of drunkenness. The argument is legitimate, though not the highest.

The vehement questions poured out on each other's heels in verse 29 are hot with both loathing and grim laughter. The two words rendered 'woe' and 'sorrow' are unmeaning exclamations, very like each other in sound, and imitating the senseless noises of the drunkard. They express discomfort as a dog might express it. They are howls rather than words. That is one of the prerogatives won by drunkenness,—to come down to the beasts' level, and to lose the power of articulate speech. The quarrelsomeness which goes along with certain stages of intoxication, and the unmeaning maudlin misery and whimpering into which it generally passes, are next coupled together.

Then come a pair of effects on the body. The tipsy man cannot take care of himself, and reeling against

obstacles, or falling over them, wounds himself, and does not know where the scratches and blood came from. 'Redness of eyes' is, perhaps, rather 'darkness,' meaning thereby dim sight, or possibly 'black eyes,' as we say,—a frequent accompaniment of drunkenness, and corresponding to the wounds in the previous clause. It is a hideous picture, and one that should be burned in on the imagination of every young man and woman. The liquor-sodden, miserable wrecks that are found in thousands in our great cities, of whom this is a picture, were, most of them, in Sunday-schools in their day. The next generation of such poor creatures are, many of them, in Sunday-schools now, and may be reading this passage to-day.

The answer to these questions has a touch of irony in it. The people who win as their possessions these six precious things have to sit up late to earn them. What a noble cause in which to sacrifice sleep, and turn night into day! And they pride themselves on being connoisseurs in the several vintages; they 'know a good glass of wine when they see it.' What a noble field for investigation! What a worthy use of the faculties of comparison and judgment! And how desirable the prizes won by such trained taste and delicate discrimination!

In verses 31 and 32 weighty warning and dehortation follow, based in part on the preceding picture. The writer thinks that the only way of sure escape from the danger is to turn away even the eyes from the temptation. He is not contented with saying 'taste not,' but he goes the whole length of 'look not'; and that because the very sparkle and colour may attract. 'When it is red' might perhaps better be rendered 'when it reddens itself,' suggesting the play of colour,

as if put forth by the wine itself. The word rendered in the Authorised Version and Revised Version 'colour' is literally 'eye,' and probably means the beaded bubbles winking on the surface. 'Moveth itself aright' (Authorised Version) is not so near the meaning as 'goeth down smoothly' (Revised Version). The whole paints the attractiveness to sense of the wine-cup in colour, effervescence, and taste.

And then comes in, with startling abruptness, the end of all this fascination,—a serpent's bite and a basilisk's sting. The kind of poisonous snake meant in the last clause of verse 32 is doubtful, but certainly is one much more formidable than an adder. The serpent's lithe gracefulness and painted skin hide a fatal poison; and so the attractive wine-cup is sure to ruin those who look on it. The evil consequences are pursued in more detail in what follows.

But here we must note two points. The advice given is to keep entirely away from the temptation. 'Look not' is safe policy in regard of many of the snares for young lives that abound in our modern society. It is not at all needful to 'see life,' or to know the secrets of wickedness, in order to be wise and good. 'Simple concerning evil' is a happier state than to have eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Many a young man has been ruined, body and soul, by a prurient curiosity to know what sort of life dissipated men and women led, or what sort of books they were against which he was warned, or what kind of a place a theatre was, and so on. Eyes are greedy, and there is a very quick telephone from them to the desires. 'The lust of the eye' soon fans the 'lust of the flesh' into a glow. There are plenty of depths of Satan gaping for young feet; and on the whole, it is safer and happier

not to know them, and so not to have defiling memories, nor run the risk of falling into fatal sins. Whether the writer of this stern picture of a drunkard was a total abstainer or not, the spirit of his counsel not to 'look on the wine' is in full accord with that practice. It is very clear that if a man is a total abstainer, he can never be a drunkard. As much cannot be said of the moderate man.

Note too, how in all regions of life, the ultimate results of any conduct are the important ones. Consequences are hard to calculate, and they do not afford a good guidance for action. But there are many lines of conduct of which the consequences are not hard to calculate, but absolutely certain. It is childish to take a course because of a moment's gratification at the beginning, to be followed by protracted discomfort afterwards. To live for present satisfaction of desires, and to shut one's eyes tight against known and assured results of an opposite sort, cannot be the part of a sensible man, to say nothing of a religious one. So moralists have been preaching ever since there was such a thing as temptation in the world; and men have assented to the common sense of the teaching, and then have gone straight away and done the exact opposite.

'What shall the end be?' ought to be the question at every beginning. If we would cultivate the habit of holding present satisfactions in suspense, and of giving no weight to present advantages until we saw right along the road to the end of the journey, there would be fewer failures, and fewer weary, disenchanted old men and women, to lament that the harvest they had to reap and feed on was so bitter. There are other and higher reasons against any kind of fleshly

indulgence than that at the last it bites like a serpent, and with a worse poison than serpent's sting ever darted; but that is a reason, and young hearts, which are by their very youth blessedly unused to look forward, will be all the happier to-day, and all the surer of to-morrow's good, if they will learn to say, 'And afterwards—what?'

The passage passes to a renewed description of the effects of intoxication, in which the disgusting and the ludicrous aspects of it are both made prominent. Verse 33 seems to describe the excited imagination of the drunkard, whose senses are no longer under his control, but play him tricks that make him a laughing-stock to sober people. One might almost take the verse to be a description of delirium tremens. 'Strange things' are seen, and perverse things (that is, unreal, or ridiculous) are stammered out. The writer has a keen sense of the humiliation to a man of being thus the fool of his own bewildered senses, and as keen a one of the absurd spectacle he presents; and he warns his 'son' against coming down to such a depth of degradation.

It may be questioned whether the boasted quickening and brightening effects of alcohol are not always, in a less degree, that same beguiling of sense and exciting of imagination which, in their extreme form, make a man such a pitiable and ridiculous sight. It is better to be dull and see things as they are, than to be brilliant and see things larger, brighter, or any way other than they are, because we see them through a mist. Imagination set agoing by such stimulus, will not work to as much purpose as if aroused by truth. God's world, seen by sober eyes, is better than rosy dreams of it. If we need to draw our inspiration from

alcohol, we had better remain uninspired. If we desire to know the naked truth of things, the less we have to do with strong drink the better. Clear eyesight and self-command are in some degree impaired by it always. The earlier stages are supposed to be exhilaration, increased brilliancy of fancy and imagination, expanded good-fellowship, and so on. The latter stages are these in our passage, when strange things dance before cheated eyes, and strange words speak themselves out of lips which their owner no longer controls. Is that a condition to be sought after? If not, do not get on to the road that leads to it.

Verse 34 adds another disgusting and ridiculous trait. A man who should try to lie down and go to sleep in the heart of the sea or on the masthead of a ship would be a manifest fool, and would not keep life in him for long. One has seen drunken men laying themselves down to sleep in places as exposed and as ridiculous as these; and one knows the look of the heavy lump of insensibility lying helpless on public roads, or on railway tracks, or anywhere where the fancy took him. The point of the verse seems to be the drunken man's utter loss of sense of fitness, and complete incapacity to take care of himself. He cannot estimate dangers. The very instinct of self-preservation has forsaken him. There he lies, though as sure to be drowned as if he were in the depth of the sea, though on as uncomfortable a bed as if he were rocking on a masthead, where he could not balance himself.

The torpor of verse 34 follows on the unnatural excitement of verse 33, as, in fact, the bursts of uncontrolled energy in which the man sees and says strange things, are succeeded by a collapse. One moment raging in excitement caused by imaginary sights, the

next huddled together in sleep like death,—what a sight the man is! The teacher here would have his ‘son’ consider that he may come to that, if he looks on the wine-cup. ‘*Thou shalt be*’ so and so. It is very impolite, but very necessary, to press home the individual application of pictures like this, and to bid bright young men and women look at the wretched creatures they may see hanging about liquor shops, and remember that they may come to be such as these.

Verse 35 finishes the picture. The tipsy man’s soliloquy puts the copestone on his degradation. He has been beaten, and never felt it. Apparently he is beginning to stir in his sleep, though not fully awake; and the first thing he discovers when he begins to feel himself over is that he has been beaten and wounded, and remembers nothing about it. A degrading anæsthetic is drink. Better to bear all ills than to drown them by drowning consciousness. There is no blow which a man cannot bear better if he holds fast by God’s hand and keeps himself fully exposed to the stroke, than if he sought a cowardly alleviation of it, after the drunkard’s fashion.

But the pains of his beating and the discomforts of his waking do not deter the drunkard. ‘When shall I awake?’ He is not fully awake yet, so as to be able to get up and go for another drink. He is in the stage of feeling sorry for himself, and examining his bruises, but he wishes he were able to shake off the remaining drowsiness, that he might ‘seek yet again’ for his curse. The tyranny of desire, which wakes into full activity before the rest of the man does, and the enfeebled will, which, in spite of all bruises and discomforts, yields at once to the overmastering desire, make the tragedy of a drunkard’s life. There comes a

point in lives of fleshly indulgence in which the craving seems to escape from the control of the will altogether. Doctors tell us that the necessity for drink becomes a physical disease. Yes; but it is a disease manufactured by the patient, and he is responsible for getting himself into such a state.

This tragic picture proves that there were many originals of it in the days when it was painted. Probably there are far more, in proportion to population, in our times. The warning it peals out was never more needed than now. Would that all preachers, parents, and children laid it to heart and took the advice not even to 'look upon the wine'!

THE CRIME OF NEGLIGENCE

'If thou forbear to deliver them that are drawn unto death, and those that are ready to be slain; 12. If thou sayest, Behold, we knew it not; doth not he that pondereth the heart consider it? and he that keepeth thy soul, doth not he render to every man according to his works?'—PROVERBS xxiv. 11, 12.

WHAT is called the missionary spirit is nothing else than the Christian church working in a particular direction. If a man has a conviction, the health of his own soul, his reverence for the truth he has learnt to love, his necessary connection with other men, make it a duty, a necessity, and a joy to tell what he has heard, and to speak what he believes. On these common grounds rests the whole obligation of Christ's followers to speak the Gospel which they have received; only the obligation presses on them with greater force because of the higher worth of the word and the deeper misery of men without it. The text contains nothing specially bearing on Christian missions, but it deals with the fault which besets us all in our relations and in life:

and the wholesome truths which it utters apply to our duties in regard to Christian missions because they apply to our duties in regard to every misery within our reach. They speak of the murderous cruelty and black sin of negligence to save any whom we can help from any sort of misery which threatens them. They appear to me to suggest four thoughts which I would now deal with:—

I. The crime of negligence.

Not to use any power is a sin; to omit to do anything that we can do is a crime: to withhold a help that we can render is to participate in the authorship of all the misery that we have failed to relieve. He who neglects to save a life, kills. There are more murderers than those who lift violent hands with malice aforethought against a hated life. Rulers or communities who leave people uncared for to die, who suffer swarming millions to live where the air is poison and the light is murky, and first the soul and then the body, are dwarfed and die; the incompetent men in high places, and the indolent ones in low, whose selfishness brings, and whose blundering blindness allows to continue, the conditions that are fatal to life—on these the guilt of blood lies. Violence slays its thousands, but supine negligence slays its tens of thousands.

And when we pass from these merely physical conditions to think of the world and of the Church in the world, where shall we find words weighty and burning enough to tell what fatal cruelty lies in the unthinking negligence so characteristic of large portions of Christ's professed followers? There is nothing which the ordinary type of Christian, so called, more needs than to be aroused to a living sense of personal responsibility for all the unalleviated misery of the world. For

every one who has laid the sorrows of humanity on his heart, and has felt them in any measure as his own, there are a hundred to whom these make no appeal and give no pang. Within ear-shot of our churches and chapels there are squalid aggregations of stunted and festering manhood, of whom it is only too true that they are 'drawn unto death' and 'ready to be slain,' and yet it would be an exaggeration to say that the bulk of our congregations cast even a languid eye of compassion upon those, to say nothing of stretching out a hand to help. It needs to be dinned, far more than it is at present, into every professing Christian that each of us has an obligation which cannot be ignored or shuffled off, to acquaint ourselves with the glaring facts that force themselves upon all thoughtful men, and that the measure of our power is the measure of our obligation. The question, Has the church done its best to deliver these? needs to be sharpened to the point of 'Have I done *my* best?' And the vision of multitudes perishing in the slums of a great city needs to be expanded into the vision of dim millions perishing in the wide world.

II. The excuse of negligence.

The shuffling plea, 'Behold we knew it not,' is a cowardly lie. It admits the responsibility to knowledge and pretends an ignorance which it knows to be partly a false excuse, and in so far as it is true, to be our own fault. We are bound to know, and the most ignorant of us does know, and cannot help knowing, enough to condemn our negligence. How many of us have ever tried to find out how the pariahs of civilisation live who live beside us? Our ignorance so far as it is real is the result of a sinful indolence. And there is a sadder form of it in an ignorance which is the

result of familiarity. We all know how custom dulls our impressions. It is well that it should be so, for a surgeon would be fit for little if he trembled and was shaken at the sight of the tumour he had to work to remove, as we should be; but his familiarity with misery does not harden him, because he seeks to remove the suffering with which he has become familiar. But that same familiarity does harden and injure the whole nature of the onlooker who does nothing to alleviate it. Then there is an ignorance of other suffering which is the result of selfish absorption in one's own concerns. The man who is caring for himself only, and whose thoughts and feelings all flow in the direction of his own success, may see spread before him the most poignant sorrows without feeling one throb of brotherly compassion and without even being aware of what his eyes see. So, in so far as the excuse 'we knew it not' is true, it is no excuse, but an indictment. It lays bare the true reason of the criminal negligence as being a yet more criminal callousness as to the woe and loss in which such crowds of men whom we ought to recognise as brethren are sunken.

III. The condemnation of negligence.

The great example of God is put forward in the text as the contrast to all this selfish negligence. Note the twofold description of Him given here, 'He that pondereth the heart,' and 'He that keepeth thy soul.' The former of these presents to us God's sedulous watching of the hearts of men, in contrast to our indolent and superficial looks; and in this divine attitude we find the awful condemnation of our disregard of our fellows. God 'takes pain,' so to speak, to see after His children. Are they not bound to look lovingly on each other? God seeks to know them.

Are they not bound to know one another? Lofty disregard of human suffering is not *God's* way. Is it ours? He 'looks down from the height of His sanctuary to hear the crying of the prisoner.' Should not we stoop from our mole-hill to see it? God has not too many concerns on His hands to mark the obscurest sorrow and be ready to help it. And shall we plead that we are too busy with petty personal concerns to take interest in helping the sorrows and fighting against the sins of the world?

No less eloquently does the other name which is here applied to God rebuke our negligence. 'He preserveth thy soul.' By His divine care and communication of life, we live; and surely the soul thus preserved is thereby bound to be a minister of preservation to all that are 'ready to be slain.' The strongest motive for seeking to save others is that God has saved us. Thus this name for God touches closely upon the great Christian thought, 'Christ has given Himself for me.' And in that thought we find the true condemnation of a Christianity which has not caught from Him the enthusiasm for self-surrender, and the passion for saving the outcast and forlorn. If to be a Christian is to imitate Christ, then the name has little application to those who see 'them that are drawn to death,' and turn from them unconcerned and unconscious of responsibility.

IV. The judgment of negligence.

'Doth not He render to every man according to his works?' There is such a judgment both in the present and in the future for Christian men as for others. And not only what they do, but what they inconsistently fail to do, comes into the category of their works, and influences their position. It does so in the present, for

no man can cherish such a maimed Christian life as makes such negligence possible without robbing himself of much that would tend to his own growth in grace and likeness to Jesus Christ. The unfaithful servant is poorer by the pound hidden in the napkin which might all the while have been laid out at interest with the money-changers, which would have increased the income whilst the lord was absent. We rob ourselves of blessed sympathies and of the still more blessed joy of service, and of the yet more blessed joy of successful effort, by our indolence and our negligence. Let us not forget that our works do follow us in this life as in the life to come, and that it is here as well as hereafter, that he that goeth forth with a full basket and scatters the precious seed with weeping, and yet with joy, shall doubtless come again bringing his sheaves with him. And if we stretch our view to take in the life beyond, what gladness can match that of the man who shall enter there with some who will be his joy and crown of rejoicing in that day, and of whom he shall be able to say, 'Behold I and the children whom Thou hast given me!'

I venture earnestly to appeal to all my hearers for more faithful discharge of this duty. I pray you to open your ears to hear, and your eyes to see, and your hearts to feel, and last of all, your hands to help, the miseries of the world. Solemn duties wait upon great privileges. It is an awful trust to have Christ and His gospel committed to our care. We get it because from One who lived no life of luxurious ease, but felt all the woes of humanity which He redeemed, and forbore not to deliver us from death, though at the cost of His own. We get it for no life of silken indolence or selfish disregard of the sorrows of our brethren. If there is one

tear we could have dried and didn't, or one wound we could have healed and didn't, that is a sin; if we could have lightened the great heap of sorrow by one grain and didn't, that is a sin; and if there be one soul that perishes which we might have saved and didn't, the negligence is not merely the omission of a duty, but the doing of a deed which will be 'rendered to us according to our works.'

THE SLUGGARD'S GARDEN

'I went by the field of the slothful, and by the vineyard of the man void of understanding; 31. And, lo, it was all grown over with thorns, and nettles had covered the face thereof, and the stone wall thereof was broken down.'—PROVERBS xxiv. 30, 31.

THIS picture of the sluggard's garden seems to be intended as a parable. No doubt its direct simple meaning is full of homely wisdom in full accord with the whole tone of the Book of Proverbs; but we shall scarcely do justice to this saying of the wise if we do not see in 'the ground grown over with thorns,' and 'the stone wall thereof broken down,' an apologue of the condition of a soul whose owner has neglected to cultivate and tend it.

I. Note first who the slothful man is.

The first plain meaning of the word is to be kept in view. The whole Book of Proverbs brands laziness as the most prolific source of poverty. Honest toil is to it the law of life. It is never weary of reiterating 'In the sweat of thy brow thou shalt eat bread'; and it condemns all swift modes of getting riches without labour. No doubt the primitive simplicity of life as set forth in this book seems far behind the many ingenuities by which in our days the law is evaded. How much of Stock Exchange speculation and 'Com-

pany promoters' gambling would survive the application of the homely old law?

But it is truer in the inward life than in the outward that 'the hand of the diligent maketh rich.' After all, the differences between men who truly 'succeed' and the human failures, which are so frequent, are more moral than intellectual. It has been said that genius is, after all, 'the capacity for taking infinite pains'; and although that is an exaggerated statement, and an incomplete analysis, there is a great truth in it, and it is the homely virtue of hard work which tells in the long run, and without which the most brilliant talents effect but little. However gifted a man may be, he will be a failure if he has not learned the great secret of dogged persistence in often unwelcomed toil. No character worth building up is built without continuous effort. If a man does not labour to be good, he will surely become bad. It is an old axiom that no man attains superlative wickedness all at once, and most certainly no man leaps to the height of the goodness possible to his nature by one spring. He has laboriously, and step by step, to climb the hill. Progress in moral character is secured by long-continued walking upwards, not by a jump.

We note that in our text 'the slothful' is paralleled by 'the man void of understanding'; and the parallel suggests the stupidity in such a world as this of letting ourselves develop according to whims, or inclinations, or passions; and also teaches that 'understanding' is meant to be rigidly and continuously brought to bear on actions as director and restrainer. If the ship is not to be wrecked on the rocks or to founder at sea, Wisdom's hand must hold the helm. Diligence alone is not enough unless directed by 'understanding.'

II. What comes of sloth.

The description of the sluggard's garden brings into view two things, the abundant, because unchecked, growth of profitless weeds, and the broken down stone wall. Both of these results are but too sadly and evidently true in regard to every life where rigid and continuous control has not been exercised. It is a familiar experience known, alas! to too many of us, that evil things, of which the seeds are in us all, grow up unchecked if there be not constant supervision and self-command. If we do not carefully cultivate our little plot of garden ground, it will soon be overgrown by weeds. 'Ill weeds grow apace' as the homely wisdom of common experience crystallises into a significant proverb. And Jesus has taught the sadder truth that 'thorns spring up and choke the word and it becometh unfruitful.' In the slothful man's soul evil will drive out good as surely as in the struggle for existence the thorns and nettles will cover the face of the slothful man's garden. In country places we sometimes come across a ruined house with what was a garden round it, and here and there still springs up a flower seeking for air and light in the midst of a smothering mass of weeds. *They* needed no kindly gardener's hand to make them grow luxuriantly; *it* can barely put out a pale petal unless cared for and guarded.

But not only is there this unchecked growth, but 'the stone wall thereof was broken down.' The soul was unfenced. The solemn imperative of duty ceases to restrain or to impel in proportion as a man yields slothfully to the baser impulses of his nature. Nothing is hindered from going out of, nor for coming into, an unfenced soul, and he that 'hath no rule over his own spirit,' but is like a 'city broken down without walls'

is certain sooner or later to let much go forth from that spirit that should have been rigidly shut up, and to let many an enemy come in that will capture the city. It is not yet safe to let any of the fortifications fall into disrepair, and they can only be kept in their massive strength by continuous vigilance.

III. How sloth excuses itself.

Our text is followed at the distance of one verse with what seemed to be the words of the sluggard in answer to the attempt to awake him: 'Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep.' They are a quotation from an earlier chapter (ch. vi.) where 'His Laziness' is sent to 'consider the ways of the ant and be wise.' They are a drowsy petition which does not dispute the wisdom of the call to awake, but simply craves for a little more luxurious laziness from which he has unwillingly been aroused. And is it not true that we admit too late the force of the summons and yet shrink from answering it? Do we not cheat ourselves and try to deceive God with the promise that we will set about amendment soon? This indolent sleeper asks only for *a little*: 'A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep.' Do we not all know that mood of mind which confesses our slothfulness and promises to be wide awake to-morrow but would fain bargain to be left undisturbed to-day? The call 'Awake thou that sleepest and arise from the dead!' rings from Christ's lips in the ears of every man, and he who answers, 'I will presently, but must sleep a little longer,' may seem to himself to have complied with the call, but has really refused it. The 'little more' generally becomes *much* more; and the answer 'presently,' alas! too often becomes the answer 'never.' When a man is roused

so as to be half awake, the only safety for him is *immediately* to rise and clothe himself; the head that drowsily droops back on the pillow after he has heard the morning's call, is likely to lie there long. Now, not 'by-and-by' is the time to shake off the bonds of sloth to cultivate our garden.

IV. How sloth ends.

The sleeper's slumber is dramatically represented as being awakened by armed robbers who bring a grim awakening. 'Poverty' and 'want' break in on his 'folding hands to sleep.' That is true as regards the outward life, where indulgence in literal slothfulness brings want, and the whole drift of things executes on the sluggard the sentence that if 'any man will not work, neither shall he eat.'

But the picture is more sadly and fatally true concerning the man who has made his earthly life 'a little sleep' as concerns heavenly things, and in spite of his beseechings, is roused to life and consciousness of himself and of God by death. That man's 'poverty' in his lack of all that is counted as wealth in the world of realities to which he goes will indeed come as a robber. I would press upon you all the plain question, Is this fatal slothfulness characteristic of me? It may co-exist with, and indeed is often the consequence of vehement energy and continuous work to secure wealth, or wisdom, or material good; and the contrast between a man who is all eagerness in regard to the things that don't matter, and all carelessness in regard to the things that do, is the tragedy of life amongst us. My friend! if *your* garden has been suffered by you to be overgrown with weeds, be sure of this, that one day you will be awakened from the slumber that you would fain continue and

will find yourself in a life where your 'poverty' will come as a robber and your want of all which *there* is counted treasure 'as an armed man.'

One word more. Christ's parable of the sower may be brought into relationship with this parable. He sows the true seed in our hearts, but when sown, it, too, has to be cared for and tended. If it is sown in the sluggard's garden, it will bring forth few ears, and the tares will choke the wheat.

AN UNWALLED CITY

'He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down, and without walls.'—PROVERBS xxv. 28.

THE text gives us a picture of a state of society when an unwall'd city is no place for men to dwell in. In the Europe of to-day there are still fortified places, but for the most part, battlements are turned into promenades; the gateways are gateless; the sweet flowers blooming where armed feet used to tread; and men live securely without bolts and bars. But their spirits cannot yet afford to raise their defences and fling themselves open to all comers.

We may see here three points: the city defenceless, or human nature as it is; the city defended, human nature as it may be in Christ; the city needing no defence, human nature as it will be in heaven.

I. The city defenceless, or human nature as it is.

Here we are in a state of warfare which calls for constant shutting out of enemies. Temptations are everywhere; our foes compass us like bees; evils of many sorts seduce. We can picture to ourselves some little garrison holding a lonely outpost against

lurking savages ready to attack if ever the defenders slacken their vigilance for a moment. And that is the truer picture of human nature as it is than the one by which most men are deluded. Life is not a playground, but an arena of grim, earnest fighting. No man does right in his sleep; no man does right without a struggle.

The need for continual vigilance and self-control comes from the very make of our souls, for our nature is not a democracy, but a kingdom. In us all there are passions, desires, affections, all of which may lead to vice or to virtue: and all of which evidently call out for direction, for cultivation, and often for repression. Then there are peculiarities of individual character which need watching lest they become excessive and sinful. Further, there are qualities which need careful cultivation and stimulus to bring them into due proportion. We each of us receive, as it were, an undeveloped self, and have entrusted to us potential germs which come to nothing, or shoot up with a luxuriance that stifles unless we exercise a controlling power. Besides all this, we all carry in us tendencies which are positively, and only, sinful. There would be no temptation if there were no such.

But the slightest inspection of our own selves clearly points out, not only what in us needs to be controlled, but that in us which is *meant* to control. The will is regal; conscience is meant to govern the will, and its voice is but the echo of God's law.

But, while all this is true, it is too sadly true that the accomplishment of this ideal is impossible in our own strength. Our own sad experience tells us that we cannot govern ourselves; and our observations of our brethren but too surely indicate that they too are the

prey of rebellious, anarchical powers within, and of temptations, against the rush of which they and we are as powerless as a voyager in a bark-canoe, caught in the fatal drift of Niagara. Conscience has a voice, but no hands; it can speak, but if its voice fails, it cannot hold us back. From its chair it can bid the waves breaking at our feet roll back, as the Saxon king did, but their tossing surges are deaf. As helpless as the mud walls of some Indian hill-fort against modern artillery, is the defence, in one's own strength, of one's own self against the world. We would gladly admit that the feeblest may do much to 'keep himself unspotted from the world'; but we must, if we recognise facts, confess that the strongest cannot do all. No man can alone completely control his own nature; no man, unenlightened by God, has a clear, full view of duty, nor a clear view of himself. Always there is some unguarded place:

'Unless above himself he can
Erect himself, how mean a thing is man!'

but no man can so lift himself so as that self will not drag him down. The walls are broken down and the troops of the spoilers sack the city.

II. The defended city, or human nature as it may be in Christ.

If our previous remarks are true, they give us material for judging how far the counsels of some very popular moral teachers should be followed. It is a very old advice, 'know thyself'; and it is a very modern one that

'Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control
Lead life to sovereign power.'

But if these counsels are taken absolutely and with-

out reference to Christ and His work, they are 'counsels of despair,' demanding what we cannot give, and promising what they cannot bestow. When we know Christ, we shall know ourselves; when He is the self of ourselves, then, and only then, shall we reverence and can we control the inner man. The city of Mansoul will then be defended when 'the peace of God keeps our hearts and minds in Jesus.'

He who submits himself to Christ is lord of himself as none else are. He has a light within which teaches him what is sin. He has a love within which puts out the flame of temptation, as the sun does a coal fire. He has a motive to resist; he has power for resistance; he has hope in resisting. Only thus are the walls broken down rebuilt. And as Christ builds our city on firmer foundations, He will appear in His glory, and will 'lay the windows in agates, and all thy borders in precious stones.' The sure way to bring our ruined earth, 'without form and void,' into a cosmos of light and beauty, is to open our spirit for the Spirit of God to 'brood upon the face of the waters.' Otherwise the attempts to rule over our own spirit will surely fail; but if we let Christ rule over our spirit, then it will rule itself.

But let us ever remember that he who thus submits to Christ, and can truly say, 'I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in *me*,' still needs defence. The strife does not thereby cease; the enemies still swarm; sin is not removed. There will be war to the end, and war for ever; but He will 'keep our heads in the day of battle'; and though often we may be driven from the walls, and outposts may be lost, and gaping breaches made, yet the citadel shall be safe. If only we see to it that '*He* is the glory in the midst of us,' He will be

'a wall of fire round about us.' Our nature as it may be in Christ is a walled city as needing defence, and as possessing the defence which it needs.

III. The city defenceless, and needing no defence; that is, human nature as it will be hereafter.

'The gates shall not be shut day nor night,' for 'everything that defileth' is without. We know but little of that future, what we *do* know will, surely, be theirs who here have been 'guarded by the power of God, through faith, unto salvation.' That salvation will bring with it the end for the need of guardianship; though it leaves untouched the blessed dependence, we shall stand secure when it is impossible to fall. And that impossibility will be realised, partly, as we know, from change in surroundings, partly from the dropping away of flesh, partly from the entire harmony of our souls with the will of God. Our ignorance of that future is great, but our knowledge of it is greater, and our certainty of it is greatest of all.

This is what we may become. Dear friends! toil no longer at the endless, hopeless task of ruling those turbulent souls of yours; you can never rebuild the walls already fallen. Give up toiling to attain calmness, peace, self-command. Let Christ do all for you, and let Him in to dwell in you and be all to you. Builded on the true Rock, we shall stand stately and safe amid the din of war. He will watch over us and dwell in us, and we shall be as 'a city set on a hill,' impregnable, a virgin city. So may it be with each of us while strife shall last, and hereafter we may quietly hope to be as a city without walls, and needing none; for they that hated us shall be far away, for between us and them is 'a great gulf fixed,' so that they cannot cross it to disturb us any more; and we shall dwell in the city of

God, of which the name is Salem, the city of peace, whose King is Himself, its Defender and its Rock, its Fortress and its high Tower.

THE WEIGHT OF SAND

'The sand is weighty.'—PROVERBS. xxvii. 3.

THIS Book of Proverbs has a very wholesome horror of the character which it calls 'a fool'; meaning thereby, not so much intellectual feebleness as moral and religious obliquity, which are the stupidest things that a man can be guilty of. My text comes from a very picturesque and vivid description, by way of comparison, of the fatal effects of such a man's passion. The proverb-maker compares two heavy things, stones and sand, and says that they are feathers in comparison with the immense lead-like weight of such a man's wrath.

Now I have nothing more to do with the immediate application of my text. I want to make a parable out of it. What is lighter than a grain of sand? What is heavier than a bagful of it? As the grains fall one by one, how easily they can be blown away! Let them gather, and they bury temples, and crush the solid masonry of pyramids. 'Sand is weighty.' The accumulation of light things is overwhelmingly ponderous. Are there any such things in our lives? If there are, what ought we to do? So you get the point of view from which I want to look at the words of our text.

I. The first suggestion that I make is that they remind us of the supreme importance of trifles.

If trivial acts are unimportant, what signifies the life of man? For ninety-nine and a half per cent. of every

man's life is made up of these light nothings; and unless there is potential greatness in them, and they are of importance, then life is all 'a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.' Small things make life; and if *they* are small, then *it* is so too.

But remember, too, that the supreme importance of so-called trivial actions is seen in this, that there may be every bit as much of the noblest things that belong to humanity condensed in, and brought to bear upon, the veriest trifle that a man can do, as on the greatest things that he can perform. We are very poor judges of what is great and what is little. We have a very vulgar estimate that noise and notoriety and the securing of, not *great* but 'big,' results of a material kind make the deeds by which they are secured, great ones. And we think that it is the quiet things, those that do not tell outside at all, that are the small ones.

Well! here is a picture for you. Half-a-dozen shabby, travel-stained Jews, sitting by a river-side upon the grass, talking to a handful of women outside the gates of a great city. Years before that, there had been what the world calls a great event, almost on the same ground—a sanguinary fight, that had settled the emperors of the then civilised world, for a time. I want to know whether the first preaching of the Gospel in Europe by the Apostle Paul, or the battle of Philippi, was the great event, and which of the two was the little one. I vote for the Jews on the grass, and let all the noise of the fight, though it reverberated through the world for a bit, die away, as 'a little dust that rises up, and is lightly laid again.' Not the noisy events are the great ones; and as much true greatness may be manifested in a poor woman stitching in her

garret as in some of the things that have rung through the world and excited all manner of vulgar applause. Trifles may be, and often are, the great things in life.

And then remember, too, how the most trivial actions have a strange knack of all at once leading on to large results, beyond what could have been expected. A man shifts his seat in a railway carriage, from some passing whim, and five minutes afterwards there comes a collision, and the bench where he had been sitting is splintered up, and the place where he is sitting is untouched, and the accidental move has saved his life. According to the old story a boy, failing in applying for a situation, stoops down in the courtyard and picks up a pin, and the millionaire sees him through the window, and it makes his fortune. We cannot tell what may come of anything; and since we do not know the far end of our deeds let us be quite sure that we have got the near end of them right. Whatever may be the issue, let us look after the motive, and then all will be right. Small seeds grow to be great trees, and in this strange and inexplicable network of things which men call circumstances, and Christians call Providence, the only thing certain is that 'great' and 'small' all but cease to be a tenable, and certainly altogether cease to be an important distinction.

Then another thing which I would have you remember is, that it is these trivial actions which, in their accumulated force, make character. Men are not made by crises. The crises reveal what we have made ourselves by the trifles. The way in which we do the little things forms the character according to which we shall act when the great things come. If the crew of a man-of-war were not exercised at boat and fire drill during many a calm day, when all was safe, what

would become of them when tempests were raging, or flames breaking through the bulk-heads? It is no time to learn drill then. And we must make our characters by the way in which, day out and day in, we do little things, and find in them fields for the great virtues which will enable us to front the crises of our fate unblenching, and to master whatsoever difficulties come in our path. Geologists nowadays distrust, for the most part, theories which have to invoke great forces in order to mould the face of a country. They tell us that the valley, with its deep sides and wide opening to the sky, may have been made by the slow operation of a tiny brooklet that trickles now down at its base, and by erosion of the atmosphere. So we shape ourselves—and *that is a great thing*—by the way we do small things.

Therefore, I say to you, dear friends! think solemnly and reverently of this awful life of ours. Clear your minds of the notion that anything is small which offers to you the alternative of being done in a right way or in a wrong; and recognise this as a fact—‘sand is weighty,’ trifles are of supreme importance.

II. Now, secondly, let me ask you to take this saying as suggesting the overwhelming weight of small sins.

That is only an application in one direction of the general principle that I have been trying to lay down; but it is one of such great importance that I wish to deal with it separately. And my point is this, that the accumulated pressure upon a man of a multitude of perfectly trivial faults and transgressions makes up a tremendous aggregate that weighs upon him with awful ponderousness.

Let me remind you, to begin with, that, properly speaking, the words ‘great’ and ‘small’ should not be

applied in reference to things about which 'right' or 'wrong' are the proper words to employ. Or, to put it into plainer language, it is as absurd to talk about the 'size' of a sin, as it is to take the superficial area of a picture as a test of its greatness. The magnitude of a transgression does not depend on the greatness of the act which transgresses—according to human standards—but on the intensity with which the sinful element is working in it. For acts make crimes, but motives make sins. If you take a bit of prussic acid, and bruise it down, every little microscopic fragment will have the poisonous principle in it; and it is very irrelevant to ask whether it is as big as a mountain or small as a grain of dust, it is poison all the same. So to talk about magnitude in regard to sins, is rather to introduce a foreign consideration. But still, recognising that there is a reality in the distinction that people make between great sins and small ones, though it is a superficial distinction, and does not go down to the bottom of things, let us deal with it now.

I say, then, that small sins, by reason of their numerousness, have a terrible accumulative power. They are like the green flies on our rose-bushes, or the microbes that our medical friends talk so much about nowadays. Like them, their power of mischief does not in the least degree depend on their magnitude, and like them, they have a tremendous capacity of reproduction. It would be easier to find a man that had not done any one sin than to find out a man that had only done it once. And it would be easier to find a man that had done no evil than a man who had not been obliged to make the second edition of his sin an enlarged one. For this is the present Nemesis of all evil, that it requires repetition, partly to still conscience, partly to satisfy excited

tastes and desires; so that animal indulgence in drink and the like is a type of what goes on in the inner life of every man, in so far as the second dose has to be stronger than the first in order to produce an equivalent effect; and so on *ad infinitum*.

And then remember that all our evil doings, however insignificant they may be, have a strange affinity with one another, so that you will find that to go wrong in one direction almost inevitably leads to a whole series of consequential transgressions of one sort or another. You remember the old story about the soldier that was smuggled into a fortress concealed in a hay cart, and opened the gates of a virgin citadel to his allies outside. Every evil thing, great or small, that we admit into our lives, still more into our hearts, is charged with the same errand as he had:—‘Set wide the door when you are inside, and let us all come in after you.’ ‘He taketh with him seven other spirits worse than himself, and they dwell there.’ ‘None of them,’ says one of the prophets, describing the doleful creatures that haunt the ruins of a deserted city, ‘shall by any means want its mate,’ and the satyrs of the islands and of the woods join together! and hold high carnival in the city. And so, brethren! our little transgressions open the door for great ones, and every sin makes us more accessible to the assaults of every other.

So let me remind you how here, in these little unnumbered acts of trivial transgression which scarcely produce any effect on conscience or on memory, but make up so large a portion of so many of our lives, lies one of the most powerful instruments for making us what we are. If we indulge in slight acts of transgression be sure of this, that we shall pass from them to far greater ones. For one man that leaps or falls all

at once into sin which the world calls gross, there are a thousand that slide into it. The storm only blows down the trees whose hearts have been eaten out and their roots loosened. And when you see a man having a reputation for wisdom and honour all at once coming crash down and disclosing his baseness, be sure that he began with small deflections from the path of right. The evil works underground; and if we yield to little temptations, when great ones come we shall fall their victims.

Let me remind you, too, that there is another sense in which 'sand is weighty.' You may as well be crushed under a sandhill as under a mountain of marble. It matters not which. The accumulated weight of the one is as great as that of the other. And I wish to lay upon the consciences of all that are listening to me now this thought, that an overwhelming weight of guilt results from the accumulation of little sins. Dear friends! I do not desire to preach a gospel of fear, but I cannot help feeling that, very largely, in this day, the ministration of the Christian Church is defective in that it does not give sufficient, though sad and sympathetic, prominence to the plain teaching of Christ and of the New Testament as to future retribution for present sin. We shall 'every one of us give account of himself to God'; and if the account is long enough it will foot up to an enormous sum, though each item may be only halfpence. The weight of a lifetime of little sins will be enough to crush a man down with guilt and responsibility when he stands before that Judge. That is all true, and you know it, and I beseech you, take it to your hearts, 'Sand is weighty.' Little sins have to be accounted for, and may crush.

III. And now, lastly, let me ask you to consider one or two of the plain, practical issues of such thoughts as these.

And, first, I would say that these considerations set in a very clear light the absolute necessity for all-round and ever-wakeful watchfulness over ourselves. A man in the tropics does not say, 'Mosquitoes are so small that it does not matter if two or three of them get inside my bed-curtains.' He takes care that not one is there before he lays himself down to sleep. There seems to be nothing more sad than the complacent, easy-going way in which men allow themselves to keep their higher moral principles and their more rigid self-examination for the 'great' things, as they suppose, and let the little things often take care of themselves. What would you think of the captain of a steamer who in calm weather sailed by rule of thumb, only getting out his sextant when storms began to blow? And what about a man that lets the myriad trivialities that make up a day pass in and out of his heart as they will, and never arrests any of them at the gate with a 'How camest thou in hither?' 'Look after the pence, and the pounds will look after themselves.' Look after your trivial acts, and, take my word for it, the great ones will be as they ought to be.

Again, may not this thought somehow take down our easy-going and self-complacent estimate of ourselves? I have no doubt that there are a number of people in my audience just now who have been more or less consciously saying to themselves whilst I have been going on, 'What have *I* to do with all this talk about sin, sin, sin? I am a decent kind of a man. I do all the duties of my daily life, and nobody can say that the white of my eyes is black. I have done no

great transgressions. What is it all about? It has nothing to do with me.'

Well, my friend! it has this to do with you—that in your life there are a whole host of things which only a very superficial estimate hinders you from recognising to be what they are—small deeds, but great sins. Is it a small thing to go, as some of you do go on from year to year, with your conduct and your thoughts and your loves and your desires utterly unaffected by the fact that there is a God in heaven, and that Jesus Christ died for you? Is that a small thing? It manifests itself in a great many insignificant actions. That I grant you; and you are a most respectable man, and you keep the commandments as well as you can. But 'the God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified.' I say that that is not a small sin.

So, dear brethren! I beseech you judge yourselves by this standard. I charge none of you with gross iniquities. I know nothing about that. But I do appeal to you all, as I do to myself, whether we must not recognise the fact that an accumulated multitude of transgressions which are only superficially small, in their aggregate weigh upon us with 'a weight heavy as frost, and deep almost as life.'

Last of all, this being the case, should we not all turn ourselves with lowly hearts, with recognition of our transgressions, acknowledging that whether it be five hundred or fifty pence that we owe, we have nothing to pay, and betake ourselves to Him who alone can deliver us from the habit and power of these small accumulated faults, and who alone can lift the burden of guilt and responsibility from off our shoulders? If you irrigate the sand it becomes fruitful soil. Christ

brings to us the river of the water of life; the inspiring, the quickening, the fructifying power of the new life that He bestows, and the sand may become soil, and the wilderness blossom as the rose. A heavy burden lies on our shoulders. Ah! yes! but 'Behold the Lamb of God that beareth away the sins of the world!' What was it that crushed Him down beneath the olives of Gethsemane? What was it that made Him cry, 'My God! Why hast Thou forsaken me?' I know no answer but one, for which the world's gratitude is all too small. 'The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all.'

'Sand is weighty,' but Christ has borne the burden. 'Cast thy burden upon the Lord,' and it will drop from your emancipated shoulders, and they will henceforth bear only the light burden of His love.

PORTRAIT OF A MATRON

'Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies. 11. The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil. 12. She will do him good, and not evil, all the days of her life. 13. She seeketh wool, and flax, and worketh willingly with her hands. 14. She is like the merchants' ships; she bringeth her food from afar. 15. She riseth also while it is yet night, and giveth meat to her household, and a portion to her maidens. 16. She considereth a field, and buyeth it; with the fruit of her hands she planteth a vineyard. 17. She girdeth her loins with strength, and strengtheneth her arms. 18. She perceiveth that her merchandise is good: her candle goeth not out by night. 19. She layeth her hands to the spindle, and her hands hold the distaff. 20. She stretcheth out her hand to the poor; yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy. 21. She is not afraid of the snow for her household: for all her household are clothed with scarlet. 22. She maketh herself coverings of tapestry; her clothing is silk and purple. 23. Her husband is known in the gates, when he sitteth among the elders of the land. 24. She maketh fine linen, and selleth it; and delivereth girdles unto the merchant. 25. Strength and honour are her clothing; and she shall rejoice in time to come. 26. She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness. 27. She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness. 28. Her children arise up, and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her. 29. Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all. 30. Favour is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised. 31. Give her of the fruit of her hands; and let her own works praise her in the gates.'—PROVERBS xxxi. 10-31.

THIS description of a good 'house-mother' attests the

honourable position of woman in Israel. It would have been impossible in Eastern countries, where she was regarded only as a plaything and a better sort of slave. The picture is about equally far removed from old-world and from modern ideas of her place. This 'virtuous woman' is neither a doll nor a graduate nor a public character. Her kingdom is the home. Her works 'praise her in the gates'; but it is her husband, and not she, that 'sits' there among the elders. There is no sentiment or light of wedded love in the picture. It is neither the ideal woman nor wife that is painted, but the ideal head of a household, on whose management, as much as on her husband's work, its well-being depends.

There is plenty of room for modern ideals by the side of this old one, but they are very incomplete without it. If we take the 'oracle which his mother taught' King Lemuel to include this picture, the artist is a woman, and her motive may be to sketch the sort of wife her son should choose. In any case, it is significant that the book which began with the magnificent picture of Wisdom as a fair woman, and hung beside it the ugly likeness of Folly, should end with this charming portrait. It is an acrostic, and the fetters of alphabetic sequence are not favourable to progress or continuity of thought.

But I venture to suggest a certain advance in the representation which removes the apparent disjointed character and needless repetition. There are, first, three verses forming a kind of prologue or introduction (vers. 10-12). Then follows the picture proper, which is brought into unity if we suppose that it describes the growing material success of the diligent housekeeper, beginning with her own willing

work, and gradually extending till she and her family are well to do and among the magnates of her town (vers. 13-29). Then follow two verses of epilogue or conclusion (vers. 30, 31).

The rendering 'virtuous' is unsatisfactory; for what is meant is not moral excellence, either in the wider sense or in the narrower to which, in reference to woman, that great word has been unfortunately narrowed. Our colloquialism 'a woman of faculty' would fairly convey the idea, which is that of ability and general capacity. We have said that there was no light of wedded love in the picture. That is true of the main body of it; but no deeper, terser expression of the inmost blessedness of happy marriage was ever spoken than in the quiet words, 'The heart of her husband trusteth in her,' with the repose of satisfaction, with the tranquillity of perfect assurance. The bond uniting husband and wife in a true marriage is not unlike that uniting us with God. Happy are they who by their trust in one another and the peaceful joys which it brings are led to united trust in a yet deeper love, mirrored to them in their own! True, the picture here is mainly that of confidence that the wife is no squanderer of her husband's goods, but the sweet thought goes far beyond the immediate application. So with the other general feature in verse 12. A true wife is a fountain of good, and good only, all the days of her life—ay, and beyond them too, when her remembrance shines like the calm west after a cloudless sunset. This being, as it were, the overture, next follows the main body of the piece.

It starts with a description of diligence in a comparatively humble sphere. Note that in verse 13 the woman is working alone. She toils 'willingly,' or, as

the literal rendering is, 'with the pleasure of her hands.' There is no profit in unwilling work. Love makes toil delightful, and delighted toil is successful. Throughout its pages the Bible reverences diligence. It is the condition of prosperity in material and spiritual things. Vainly do men and women try to dodge the law which makes the 'sweat of the brow' the indispensable requisite for 'eating bread.' When commerce becomes speculation, which is the polite name for gambling, which, again, is a synonym for stealing, it may yield much more dainty fare than bread to some for a time, but is sure to bring want sooner or later to individuals and communities. The foundation of this good woman's fortune was that she worked with a will. There is no other foundation, either for fortune or any other good, or for self-respect, or for progress in knowledge or goodness or religion.

Then her horizon widened, and she saw a way of increasing her store. 'She is like the merchants' ships; she bringeth her food from afar.' She looks afield, and sees opportunities for profitable exchange. Promptly she avails herself of these, and is at work while it is yet dark. She has a household now, and does not neglect their comfort, any more than she does their employment. Their food and their tasks are both set them in the early morning, and their mistress is up as soon as they. Her toil brings in wealth, and so verse 16 shows another step in advance. 'She considereth a field, and buyeth it,' and has made money enough to stock it with vines, and so add a new source of revenue, and acquire a new position as owning land.

But prosperity does not make her relax her efforts

so we are told again in verses 17-19 of her abridging the hours of sleep, and toiling with wool and flax, which would be useless tautology if there were not some new circumstances to account for the repetition. Encouraged by success, she 'girdeth her loins with strength,' and, since she sees that 'her merchandise is profitable,' she is the more induced to labour. She still works with her own hands (ver. 19). But the hands that are busy with distaff and spindle are also stretched out with alms in the open palm, and are extended in readiness to help the needy. A woman made unfeeling by wealth is a monster. Prosperity often leads men to niggardliness in charitable gifts; but if it does the same for a woman, it is doubly cursed. Pity and charity have their home in women's hearts. If they are so busy holding the distaff or the pen that they become hard and insensible to the cry of misery, they have lost their glory.

Then follow a series of verses describing how increased wealth brings good to her household and herself. The advantages are of a purely material sort. Her children are 'clothed with scarlet,' which was not only the name of the dye, but of the stuff. Evidently thick material only was dyed of that hue, and so was fit for winter clothing, even if the weather was so severe for Palestine that snow fell. Her house was furnished with 'carpets,' or rather 'cushions' or 'pillows,' which are more important pieces of furniture where people recline on divans than where they sit on chairs. Her own costume is that of a rich woman. 'Purple and fine linen' are tokens of wealth, and she is woman enough to like to wear these. There is nothing unbecoming in assuming the style of living appropriate to one's position. Her children and her-

self thus share in the advantages of her industry; and the husband, who does not appear to have much business of his own, gets his share in that he sits among the wealthy and honoured inhabitants of the town, 'in the gates,' the chief place of meeting for business and gossip.

Verse 24 recurs to the subject of the woman's diligence. She has got into a 'shipping business,' making for the export trade with the 'merchants'—literally, 'Canaanites' or Phœnicians, the great traders of the East, from whom, no doubt, she got the 'purple' of her clothing in exchange for her manufacture. But she had a better dress than any woven in looms or bought with goods. 'Strength and dignity' clothe her. 'She laugheth at the time to come'; that is, she is able to look forward without dread of poverty, because she has realised a competent sum. Such looking forward may be like that of the rich man in the parable, a piece of presumption, but it may also be compatible with devout recognition of God's providence. As in verse 20, beneficence was coupled with diligence, so in verse 26 gentler qualities are blended with strength and dignity, and calm anticipation of the future.

A glimpse into 'the very pulse' of the woman's nature is given. A true woman's strength is always gentle, and her dignity attractive and gracious. Prosperity has not turned her head. 'Wisdom,' the heaven-descended virgin, the deep music of whose call we heard sounding in the earlier chapters of Proverbs, dwells with this very practical woman. The collocation points the lesson that heavenly Wisdom has a field for its display in the common duties of a busy life, does not dwell in hermitages, or cloisters, or studies, but may guide and inspire a careful house-

keeper in her task of wisely keeping her husband's goods together. The old legend of the descending deity who took service as a goat-herd, is true of the heavenly Wisdom, which will come and live in kitchens and shops.

But the ideal woman has not only wisdom in act and word, but 'the law of kindness is on her tongue.' Prosperity should not rob her of her gracious demeanour. Her words should be glowing with the calm flame of love which stoops to lowly and undeserving objects. If wealth leads to presumptuous reckoning on the future, and because we have 'much goods laid up for many years,' we see no other use of leisure than to eat and drink and be merry, we fatally mistake our happiness and our duty. But if gentle compassion and helpfulness are on our lips and in our hearts and deeds, prosperity will be blessed.

Nor does this ideal woman relax in her diligence, though she has prospered. Verse 27 seems very needless repetition of what has been abundantly said already, unless we suppose, as before, new circumstances to account for the reintroduction of a former characteristic. These are, as it seems to me, the increased wealth of the heroine, which might have led her to relax her watchfulness. Some slacking off might have been expected and excused; but at the end, as at the beginning, she looks after her household and is herself diligent. The picture refers only to outward things. But we may remember that the same law applies to all, and that any good, either of worldly wealth or of intellectual, moral, or religious kind, is only preserved by the continuous exercise of the same energies which won it at first.

Verses 28 and 29 give the eulogium pronounced by

children and husband. The former 'rise up' as in reverence; the latter declares her superiority to all women, with the hyperbolical language natural to love. Happy the man who, after long years of wedded life, can repeat the estimate of his early love with the calm certitude born of experience!

The epilogue in verses 30 and 31 is not the continuation of the husband's speech. It at once points the lesson from the whole picture for King Lemuel, and unveils the root of the excellences described. Beauty is skin deep. Let young men look deeper than a fair face. Let young women seek for that beauty which does not fade. The fear of the Lord lies at the bottom of all goodness that will last through the tear and wear of wedded life, and of all domestic diligence which is not mere sordid selfishness or slavish toil. The narrow arena of domestic life affords a fit theatre for the exercise of the highest gifts and graces; and the woman who has made a home bright, and has won and kept a husband's love and children's reverence, may let who will grasp at the more conspicuous prizes which women are so eager after nowadays. She has chosen the better part, which shall not be taken from her. She shall receive 'of the fruit of her hands' both now and hereafter, if the fear of the Lord has been the root from which that fruit has grown; and 'her works shall praise her in the gate,' though she sits quietly in her home. It is well when our deeds are the trumpeters of our fame, and when to tell them is to praise us.

The whole passage is the hallowing of domestic life, a directory for wives and mothers, a beautiful ideal of how noble a thing a busy mother's life may be, an exhibition to young men of what they should seek, and

of young women of what they should aim at. It were well for the next generation if the young women of this one were as solicitous to make cages as nets, to cultivate qualities which would keep love in the home as to cultivate attractions which lure him to their feet.

ECCLESIASTES; OR, THE PREACHER

WHAT PASSES AND WHAT ABIDES

'One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever.'—ECCLES. i. 4.

'And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.'—1 JOHN ii. 17.

A GREAT river may run through more than one kingdom, and bear more than one name, but its flow is unbroken. The river of time runs continuously, taking no heed of dates and calendars. The importance that we attach to the beginnings or endings of years and centuries is a sentimental illusion, but even an illusion that rouses us to a consciousness of the stealthy gliding of the river may do us good, and we need all the helps we can find to wise retrospect and sober anticipation. So we must let the season colour our thoughts, even whilst we feel that in yielding to that impulse we are imagining what has no reality in the passing from the last day of one century to the first day of another.

I do not mean to discuss in this sermon either the old century or the new in their wider social and other aspects. That has been done abundantly. We shall best do our parts in making the days, and the years, and the century what they should be, if we let the truths that come from these combined texts sink into and influence our individual lives. I have put them together, because they are so strikingly antithetical,

both true, and yet looking at the same facts from opposite points of view. But the antithesis is not really so complete as it sounds at first hearing, because what the Preacher means by 'the earth' that 'abideth for ever' is not quite the same as what the Apostle means by the 'world' that 'passes,' and the 'generations' that come and go are not exactly the same as the men that 'abide for ever.' But still the antithesis is real and impressive. The bitter melancholy of the Preacher saw but the surface; the joyous faith of the Apostle went a great deal deeper, and putting the two sets of thoughts and ways of looking at man and his dwelling-place together, we get lessons that may well shape our individual lives.

So let me ask you to look, in the first place, at—

I. The sad and superficial teaching of the Preacher.

Now in reading this Book of Ecclesiastes—which I am afraid a great many people do not read at all—we have always to remember that the wild things and the bitter things which the Preacher is saying so abundantly through its course do not represent his ultimate convictions, but thoughts that he took up in his progress from error to truth. His first word is: 'All is vanity!' That conviction had been set vibrating in his heart, as it is set vibrating in the heart of every man who does as he did, viz., seeks for solid good away from God. That is his starting-point. It is not true. All is not vanity, except to some *blasé* cynic, made cynical by the failure of his voluptuousness, and to whom 'all things here are out of joint,' and everything looks yellow because his own biliary system is out of order. That is the beginning of the book, and there are hosts of other things in the course of it as one-sided, as cynically bitter, and therefore superficial. But the end of it is:

'Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter; fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.' In his journey from the one point to the other my text is the first step, 'One generation goeth, and another cometh: the earth abideth for ever.'

He looks out upon humanity, and sees that in one aspect the world is full of births, and in another full of deaths. Coffins and cradles seem the main furniture, and he hears the tramp, tramp, tramp of the generations passing over a soil honeycombed with tombs, and therefore ringing hollow to their tread. All depends on the point of view. The strange history of humanity is like a piece of shot silk; hold it at one angle, and you see dark purple, hold at another, and you see bright golden tints. Look from one point of view, and it seems a long history of vanishing generations. Look to the rear of the procession, and it seems a buoyant spectacle of eager, young faces pressing forwards on the march, and of strong feet treading the new road. But yet the total effect of that endless procession is to impress on the observer the transiency of humanity. And that wholesome thought is made more poignant still by the comparison which the writer here draws between the fleeting generations and the abiding earth. Man is the lord of earth, and can mould it to his purpose, but it remains and he passes. He is but a lodger in an old house that has had generations of tenants, each of whom has said for a while, 'It is mine'; and they all have drifted away, and the house stands. The Alps, over which Hannibal stormed, over which the Goths poured down on the fertile plains of Lombardy, through whose passes mediæval emperors led their forces, over whose summits Napoleon brought his men,

through whose bowels this generation has burrowed its tunnels, stand the same, and smile the same amid their snows, at the transient creatures that have crawled across them. The primrose on the rock blooms in the same place year after year, and nature and it are faithful to their covenant, but the poet's eyes that fell upon them are sealed with dust. Generations have gone, the transient flower remains. 'One generation cometh and another goeth,' and the tragedy is made more tragical because the stage stands unaltered, and 'the earth abides for ever.' That is what sense has to say—'the foolish senses'—and that is all that sense has to say. Is it all that can be said? If it is, then the Preacher's bitter conclusion is true, and 'all is vanity and chasing after wind.'

He immediately proceeds to draw from this undeniable, but, as I maintain, partial fact, the broad conclusion which cannot be rebutted, if you accept what he has said in my text as being the sufficient and complete account of man and his dwelling-place. If, says he, it is true that one generation comes and another goes, and the earth abides for ever, and if that is all that has to be said, then all things are full of labour. There is immense activity, and there is no progress; it is all rotary motion round and round and round, and the same objects reappear duly and punctually as the wheel revolves, and life is futile. Yes; so it is unless there is something more to be said, and the life that is thus futile is also, as it seems to me, inexplicable if you believe in God at all. If man, being what he is, is wholly subject to that law of mutation and decay, then not only is he made 'a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death,' but he is also inferior to that persistent, old mother-earth from whose bosom he has

come. If all that you have to say of him is, 'Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return,' then life is futile, and God is not vindicated for having produced it.

And there is another consequence that follows, if this is all that we have got to say. If the cynical wisdom of Ecclesiastes is the ultimate word, then I do not assert that morality is destroyed, because right and wrong are not dependent either upon the belief in a God, or on the belief in immortality. But I do say that to declare that the fleeting, transient life of earth is all does strike a staggering blow at all noble ethics and paralyses a great deal of the highest forms of human activity, and that, as has historically been the case, so on the large scale, and, speaking generally, it will be the case, that the man whose creed is only 'To-morrow we die' will very speedily draw the conclusion, 'Let us eat and drink,' and sensuous delights and the lower side of his nature will become dominant.

So, then, the Preacher had not got at the bottom of all things, either in his initial conviction that all was vanity, or in that which he laid down as the first step towards establishing that, that man passes and the earth abides. There is more to be said; the sad, superficial teaching of the Preacher needs to be supplemented.

Now turn for a moment to what does supplement it.

II. The joyous and profounder teaching of the Apostle.

The cynic never sees the depths; that is reserved for the mystical eye of the lover. So John says: 'No, no; that is not all. Here is the true state of affairs: "The world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever."' The doctrine of the passing generations and the abiding earth is

fronted squarely in my second text by the not contradictory, but complementary doctrine of the passing world and the abiding men. I do not suppose that John had this verse of Ecclesiastes in his mind, for the word 'abide' is one of his favourite expressions, and is always cropping up. But even though he had not, we find in his utterance the necessary correction to the first text. As I have said, and now need not do more than repeat in a sentence, the antithesis is not so complete as it seems. John's 'world' is not the Preacher's 'earth,' but he means thereby, as we all know, the aggregate of created things, including men, considered apart from God, and in so far as it includes voluntary agents set in opposition to God and the will of God. He means the earth rent away from God, and turned to be what it was not meant to be, a minister of evil, and he means men, in so far as they have parted themselves from God and make up an alien, if not a positively antagonistic company.

Perhaps he was referring, in the words of our text, to the break-up of the existing order of things which he discerned as impending and already begun to take effect in consequence of the coming of Jesus Christ, the shining of the true Light. For you may remember that in a previous part of the epistle he uses precisely the same expression, with a significant variation. Here, in our text, he says, 'The world passeth away'; there he says, 'The darkness has passed and the true light now shineth.' He sees a process installed and going on, in which the whole solid-seeming fabric of a godless society is being dissolved and melted away. And says he, in the midst of all this change there is one who stands unchanged, the man that does God's will.

But just for a moment we may take the lower point

of view, and see here a flat contradiction of the Preacher. He said, 'Men go, and the world abides.'

No,' says John; 'your own psalmists might have taught you better: "As a vesture shalt Thou change them, and they shall be changed."' The world, the earth, which seems so solid and permanent, is all the while in perpetual flux, as our later science has taught us, in a sense of which neither Preacher nor Apostle could dream. For just as from the beginning forces were at work which out of the fire-mist shaped sun and planets, so the same forces, continuing in operation, are tending towards the end of the system which they began; and a contracting sun and a diminished light and a lowered temperature and the narrower orbits in which the planets shall revolve, prophecy that 'the elements shall melt with fervent heat,' and that all things which have been made must one day cease to be. Nature is the true Penelope's web, ever being woven and ever being unravelled, and in the most purely physical and scientific sense the world is passing away. But then, because you and I belong, in a segment of our being, to that which thus is passing away, we come under the same laws, and all that has been born must die. So the generations come, and in their very coming bear the prophecy of their going. But, on the other hand, there is an inner nucleus of our being, of which the material is but the transient envelope and periphery, which holds nought of the material, but of the spiritual, and that 'abides for ever.'

But let us lift the thought rather into the region of the true antithesis which John was contemplating, which is not so much the crumbling away of the material, and the endurance of the spiritual, as the

essential transiency of everything that is antagonism to the will of God, and the essential eternity of everything which is in conformity with that will. And so, says he, 'The world is passing, and the lust thereof.' The desires that grasp it perish with it, or perhaps, more truly still, the object of the desire perishes, and with it the possibility of their gratification ceases, but the desire itself remains. But what of the man whose life has been devoted to the things seen and temporal, when he finds himself in a condition of being where none of these have accompanied him? Nothing to slake his lusts, if he be a sensualist. No money-bags, ledgers, or cheque-books if he be a plutocrat or a capitalist or a miser. No books or dictionaries if he be a mere student. Nothing of his vocations if he lived for 'the world.' But yet the appetite is abiding. Will that not be a thirst that cannot be slaked?

'The world is passing and the lust thereof,' and all that is antagonistic to God, or separated from Him, is essentially as 'a vapour that appeareth for a little time, and then vanishes away,' whereas the man who does the will of God abideth for ever, in that he is steadfast in the midst of change.

'His hand the good man fastens on the skies,
And lets earth roll, nor heeds its idle whirl.'

He shall 'abide for ever,' in the sense that his work is perpetual. In one very deep and solemn sense, nothing human ever dies, but in another all that is not running in the same direction as, and borne along by the impulse of, the will of God, is destined to be neutralised and brought to nothing at last. There may be a row of figures as long as to reach from here to the fixed stars, but if there is not in front of them the significant digit,

which comes from obedience to the will of God, all is but a string of ciphers, and their net result is nothing. And he 'abideth for ever,' in the most blessed and profound sense, in that through his faith, which has kindled his love, and his love which has set in motion his practical obedience, he becomes participant of the very eternity of the living God. 'This is eternal life,' not merely to know, but 'to do the will' of our Father. Nothing else will last, and nothing else will prosper, any more than a bit of driftwood can stem Niagara. Unite yourself with the will of God, and you abide.

And now let me, as briefly as I can, throw together—

III. The plain, practical lessons that come from both these texts.

May I say, without seeming to be morbid or unpractical, one lesson is that we should cultivate a sense of the transiency of this outward life? One of our old authors says somewhere, that it is wholesome to smell at a piece of turf from a churchyard. I know that much harm has been done by representing Christianity as mainly a scheme which is to secure man a peaceful death, and that many morbid forms of piety have given far too large a place to the contemplation of skulls and cross-bones. But for all that, the remembrance of death present in our lives will often lay a cool hand upon a throbbing brow; and, like a bit of ice used by a skilful physician, will bring down the temperature, and stay the too tumultuous beating of the heart. 'So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.' It will minister energy, and lead us to say, like our Lord, 'We must work the works of Him that sent Me while it is day; the night cometh.'

Let me say again—a very plain, practical lesson is to dig deep down for our foundations below the rubbish

that has accumulated. If a man wishes to build a house in Rome or in Jerusalem he has to go fifty or sixty feet down, through potsherds and broken tiles and triturated marbles, and the dust of ancient palaces and temples. We have to drive a shaft clear down through all the superficial strata, and to lay the first stones on the Rock of Ages. Do not build on that which quivers and shakes beneath you. Do not try to make your life's path across the weeds, or as they call it in Egypt, the 'sudd,' that floats on the surface of the Nile, compacted for many a mile, and yet only a film on the surface of the river, to be swept away some day. Build on God.

And the last lesson is, let us see to it that our wills are in harmony with His, and the work of our hands His work. We can do that will in all the secularities of our daily life. The difference between the work that shrivels up and disappears and the work that abides is not so much in its external character, or in the materials on which it is expended, as in the motive from which it comes. So that, if I might so say, if two women are sitting at the same millstone face to face, and turning round the same handle, one of them for one half the circumference, and the other for the other, and grinding out the same corn, the one's work may be 'gold, silver, precious stones,' which shall abide the trying fire; and the other's may be 'wood, hay, stubble,' which shall be burnt up. 'He that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.'

So let us set ourselves, dear friends! to our several tasks for this coming year. Never mind about the century, it will take care of itself. Do your little work in your little corner, and be sure of this, that amidst changes you will stand unchanged, amidst tumults you

may stand calm, in death you will be entering on a fuller life, and that what to others is the end will be to you the beginning. 'If any man's work abide, he shall receive a reward,' and he himself shall abide with the abiding God.

The bitter cynic said half the truth when he said, 'One generation goeth, and another cometh; but the earth abides.' The mystic Apostle saw the truth steadily, and saw it whole when he said, 'Lo! the world passeth away, and the lust thereof; but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.'

THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

'The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun.'—ECCLES. I. 9.

'That he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh to the lusts of men, but to the will of God. 3. For the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles.'—1 PETER IV. 2, 3.

IF you will look at these two passages carefully you will, I think, see that they imply two different, and in some respects contradictory, thoughts about the future in its relation to the past. The first of them is the somewhat exaggerated utterance of a dreary and depressing philosophy, which tells us that, as in the outer world, so in regard to man's life, there is an enormous activity and no advance, that it is all moving round like the scenes in some circular panorama, that after it has gone the round back it comes again, that it is the same thing over and over again, that life is a treadmill, so to speak, with an immense deal of working of muscles; but it all comes to nothing over again. 'The rivers run into the sea and the sea is not full, and where the rivers come from they go back to; and the wind goes to the south, turns to the north, and whirls about'

continually. Everything is full of labour, and it has all been done before, and there is nothing fresh; everything is flat, stale, and unprofitable.'

Well that is not true altogether, but though it be not true altogether—though it be an exaggeration, and though the inference that is built upon it is not altogether satisfactory and profound—yet the thought itself is one that has a great deal in it that is true and important, and may be very helpful and profitable to us now; for there is a religious way, as well as an irreligious way, of saying there is nothing new under the sun. It may be the utterance of a material, *blasé*, unprofitable, spurious philosophy, or it may be the utterance of the profoundest, and the happiest, and the most peaceful religious trust and confidence.

The other passage implies the opposite notion of man's life, that however much in my future may be just the same as what my past has been, there is a region in which it is quite possible to make to-morrow unlike to-day, and so to resolve and so to work as that 'the time past of our lives' may be different from 'the rest of our time in the flesh'; that a great revolution may come upon a man, and that whilst the outward life is continuous and the same, and the tasks to be done are the same, and the joys the same, there may be such a profound and radical difference in the spirit and motive in which they are done as that the thing that has been is *not* that which shall be, and for us there *may* be a new thing under the sun.

And so just now I think we may take these two passages in their connection—their opposition, and in their parallelism—as suggesting to us two very helpful, mutually completing thoughts about the unknown future that stretches before us—first, the substantial

identity of the future with the past; second, the possible total unlikeness of the future and the past.

First then, let us try to get the impress from the first phrase of that conviction, so far as it is true, as to the sameness of the things that are going to be with the things that have been. The immediate connection in which the words are spoken is in regard, mainly, to the outer world, the physical universe, and only secondarily and subordinately in regard to man's life. And I need not remind you how that thought of the absolute sameness and continuous repetition of the past and the future has gained by the advance of physical science in modern times. It seems to be contradicted no doubt by the continual emergence of new things here and there, but they tell us that the novelty is only a matter of arrangement, that the atoms have never had an addition to them since the beginning of things, that all stand just as they were from the very commencement and foundation of all things, and that all that seems new is only a new arrangement, so that the thing which has been is that which shall be. And then there comes up the other thought, upon which I need not dwell for a moment, that the present condition of things round about us is the result of the uniform forces that have been working straight on from the very beginning. And yet, whilst all that is quite true, we come to our own human lives, and we find there the true application of such words as these: to-morrow is to be like yesterday. There is one very important sense in which the opposite of that is true, and no to-morrow can ever be like any yesterday for however much the events may be the same, we are so different that, in regard even to the most well trodden and beaten of our paths of daily life, we may

all say, 'We have not passed this way before!' We cannot bring back that which is gone—that which is gone is gone for good or evil, irrevocable as the snow or the perfume of last year's flowers. I dare say there are many here before me who are saying to themselves, 'No! life can never again be what life has been for me, and the only thing that I am quite sure about in regard to to-morrow is that it is utterly impossible that it should ever be as yesterday was!' Notwithstanding, the word of my text is a true word, the thing that hath been is that which shall be. I need not dwell on the grounds upon which the certainty rests, such, for instance, as that the powers which shape to-morrow are the same as the powers which shaped yesterday; that you and I, in our nature, are the same, and that the mighty Hand up there that is moulding it is the same; that every to-morrow is the child of all the yesterdays; that the same general impression will pervade the future as has pervaded the past. Though events may be different the general stamp and characteristics of them will be the same, and when we pass into a new region of human life we shall find that we are not walking in a place where no footprints have been before us, but that all about us the ground is trodden down smooth.

'That which hath been is that which shall be.' Thus, while this is proximately true in regard to the future, let me just for a moment or two give you one or two of the plain, simple pieces of well-worn wisdom which are built upon such a thought. And first of all let me give you this, 'Well, then, let us learn to tone down our expectations of what may be coming to us.' Especially I speak now to the younger portion of my congregation, to whom life is beginning, and to whom it is naturally

tinted with roseate hue, and who have a great deal stretching before them which is new to them, new duties, new relationships, new joys. But whilst that is specially true for them it is true for all. It is a strange illusion under which we all live to the very end of our lives, unless by reflection and effort we become masters of it and see things in the plain daylight of common sense, that the future is going somehow or other to be brighter, better, fuller of resources, fuller of blessings, freer from sorrow than the past has been. We turn over each new leaf that marks a new year, and we cannot help thinking: 'Well! perhaps hidden away in its storehouses there may be something brighter and better in store for me.' It is well, perhaps, that we should have that thought, for if we were not so drawn on, even though it be by an illusion, I do not know that we should be able to live on as we do. But don't let us forget in the hours of quiet that there is no reason at all to expect that any of these arbitrary, and conventional, and unreal distinctions of calendars and dates make any difference in that uniform strand of our life which just runs the same, which is reeled off the great drum of the future and on to the great drum of the past, and that is all spun out of one fibre and is one gauge, and one sort of stuff from the beginning to the end. And so let us be contented where we are, and not fancy that when I get that thing that I am looking forward to, when I get into that position I am waiting for, things will be much different from what they are to-day. Life is all one piece, the future and the past, the pattern runs right through from the beginning to the end, and the stuff is the same stuff. So don't you be too enthusiastic, you people who have an eager ambition for social and political advancement. Things

will be very much as they are used to be, with perhaps some slow, gradual, infinitesimal approximation to a higher ideal and a nobler standard; but there will be no jump, no breaks, no spasmodic advance. We must be contented to accept the law, that there is no new thing under the sun. As you would lay a piece of healing ice upon the heated forehead, lay that law upon the feverish anticipations some of you have in regard to the future, and let the heart beat more quietly, and with the more contentment for the recognition of that law.

And then I may say, at the same time, though I won't dwell upon it for more than a moment, let us take the same thought to teach us to moderate our fears. Don't be afraid that anything whatever may come that will destroy the substantial likeness between the past and the future; and so leave all those jarring and terrifying thoughts that mingle with all our anticipations of the time to come, leave them very quietly on one side and say, 'Thou hast been my Help, leave me not, neither forsake me, O God of my salvation.'

And then there are one or two other points I mean to touch upon, and let me just name them. Do not let us so exaggerate that thought of the substantial sameness of the future and the past as to flatten life and make it dreary and profitless and insignificant. Let us rather feel, as I shall have to say presently, that whilst the framework remains the same, whilst the general characteristics will not be much different, there is room within that uniformity for all possible play of variety and interest, and earnestness and enthusiasm, and hope. They make the worst possible use of this fixity and steadfastness of things who say, as the dreary man at

the beginning of the Book of Ecclesiastes is represented as saying, that because things are the same as they will and have been, all is vanity. It is not true. Don't let the uniformity of life flatten your interest in the great miracle of every fresh day, with its fresh continuation of ancient blessings and the steadfast mercies of our Lord.

And let us hold firmly to the far deeper truth that the future will be the same as the past, because God is the same. God's yesterday is God's to-morrow—the same love, the same resources, the same wisdom, the same power, the same sustaining Hand, the same encompassing Presence. 'A thousand years are as one day, and one day as a thousand years'; and when we say there is no new thing under the sun let us feel that the deepest way of expressing that thought is, 'Thou art the same, and Thy steadfast purposes know no alteration.'

Turn to the other side of the thought suggested by the second passage of the text. It speaks to us, as I have said, of the possible entire unlikeness between the future and the past. To-morrow is the child of yesterday—granted; 'whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he reap'—certainly; there is a persistent uniformity of nature, and the same causes working make the future much of the same general structure as all the past has been—be it so; and yet within the limits of that identity there may be breathed into the self-sameness of to-morrow such an entire difference of disposition, temper, motive, direction of life, that my whole life may be revolutionised, my whole being, I was going to say, cleft in twain, my old life buried and forgotten, and a new life may emerge from chaos and from the dead. Of course, the question, Is such an

alteration possible? rises up very solemnly to men, to most of them, for I suppose we all of us know what it is to have been beaten time after time in the attempt to shake off the dominion of some habit or evil, and to alter the bearing and the direction of the whole life, and we have to say, 'It is no good trying any longer my life must run on in the channel which I have carved for it; I have made my bed and I must lie on it; I cannot get rid of these things.' And, no doubt, in certain aspects, change is impossible. There are certain limitations of natural disposition which I never can overcome. For instance, if I have no musical ear I cannot turn myself into a musician. If I have no mathematical faculty it is no good poring over Euclid, for, with the best intentions in the world, I shall make nothing of it. We must work within the limits of our natural disposition, and cut our coat according to our cloth. In that respect to-morrow will be as yesterday, and there cannot be any change. And it is quite true that character, which is the great precipitate from the waters of conduct, gets rocky, that habits become persistent, and man's will gets feeble by long indulgence in any course of life. But for all that, admitting to the full all that, I am here now to say to every man and woman in this place, 'Friend, you may make your life from this moment so unlike the blotted, stained, faultful, imperfect, sinful past that no words other than the words of the New Testament will be large enough to express the fact. "If any man be in Christ he is a new creature, old things are passed away."' For we all know how into any life the coming of some large conviction not believed in or perceived before, may alter the whole bias, current, and direction of it; how into any life the coming of a new love not

cherished and entertained before, may ennoble and transfigure the whole of its nature; how into any life the coming of new motives, not yielded to and recognised before, may make all things new and different. These three plain principles, the power of conviction, the power of affection, the power of motive, are broad enough to admit of building upon them this great and helpful and hopeful promise to us all—'The time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles,' that 'henceforth we may live the rest of our time in the flesh according to the will of God.'

To you who have been living in the past with little regard to the supreme powers and principles of Christ's love and God's Gospel in Him, I bring the offer of a radical revolution; and I tell you that if you like you may this day begin a life which, though it shall be like yesterday in outward things, in the continuity of some habits, in the continuance of character, shall be all under the influence of an entirely new, and innovating, and renovating power. I ask you whether you don't think that you have had enough, to use the language of my text, in the part of obeying the will of the flesh; and I beseech you that you will let these great principles, these grand convictions which cluster round and explain the cross of Jesus Christ, influence your mind, character, habits, desires, thoughts, actions; that you will yield yourself to the new power of the Spirit of life in Christ, which is granted to us if only we submit ourselves to it and humbly desire it. And to you who have in some measure lived by this mighty influence I come with the message for you and for myself that the time to come may, if we will, be filled very much fuller than it is; 'To-morrow may be as this day, and much more abundant.' I believe in a patient

reflecting, abundant examination of the past. The old proverb says that 'Every man by the time he is forty is either a fool or a physician'; and any man or woman by the time they get ten years short of that age, ought to know where they are weakest, and ought to be able to guard against the weak places in their character. I do not believe in self-examination for the purpose of finding in a man's own character reasons for answering the question, 'Am I a Christian?' But I do believe that no people will avail themselves fully of the power God has given them for making the future brighter and better than the past who have not a very clear, accurate, comprehensive, and penetrating knowledge of their faults and their failures in the past. I suppose if the Tay Bridge is to be built again, it won't be built of the same pattern as that which was blown into the water last week; and you and I ought to learn by experience the places in our souls that give in the tempests, where there is most need for strengthening the bulwarks and defending our natures. And so I say, begin with the abundant recognition of the past, and then a brave confidence in the possibilities of the future. Let us put ourselves under that great renovating Power which is conviction and affection and motive all in one. 'He loved me and gave Himself for me.' And so while we front the future we can feel that, God being in us, and Christ being in us, we shall make it a far brighter and fairer thing than the blurred and blotted past which to-day is buried, and life may go on with grand blessedness and power until we shall hear the great voice from the Throne say, 'There shall be no more death, no more sorrow, no more crying, no more pain, for the former things are passed away,' 'Behold! I make all things new.'

TWO VIEWS OF LIFE

This sore travail hath God given to the sons of man, to be exercised therewith.
—ECCLES. i. 13.

'He for our profit, that we might be partakers of His holiness.'—
HEBREWS xii. 10.

THESE two texts set before us human life as it looks to two observers. The former admits that God shapes it; but to him it seems sore travail, the expenditure of much trouble and efforts; the results of which seem to be nothing beyond profitless exercise. There is an immense activity and nothing to show for it at the end but wearied limbs. The other observer sees, at least, as much of sorrow and trouble as the former, but he believes in the 'Father of spirits,' and in a hereafter; and these, of course, bring a meaning and a wider purpose into the 'sore travail,' and make it, not futile but, profitable to our highest good.

I. Note first the Preacher's gloomy half-truth.

The word rendered in our text 'travail' is a favourite one with the writer. It means occupation which costs effort and causes trouble. The phrase 'to be exercised therewith,' rather means *to fatigue themselves*, so that life as looked upon by the Preacher consists of effort without result but weariness.

If he knew it at all, it was very imperfectly and dimly; and whatever may be thought of teaching on that subject which appears in the formal conclusion of the book, the belief in a future state certainly exercises no influence on its earlier portions. These represent phases through which the writer passes on his way to his conclusion. He does believe in 'God,' but, very significantly, he never uses the sacred name 'Lord.' He has shaken himself free, or he wishes to represent a

character who has shaken himself free from Revelation, and is fighting the problem of life, its meaning and worth, without any help from Law, or Prophet, or Psalm. He does retain belief in what he calls 'God,' but his pure Theism, with little, if any, faith in a future life, is a creed which has no power of unravelling the perplexed mysteries of life, and of answering the question, 'What does it all mean?' With keen and cynical vision he looks out not only over men, as in this first chapter, but over nature; and what mainly strikes him is the enormous amount of work that is being done, and the tragical poverty of its results. The question with which he begins his book is, 'What profit hath a man of all his labour wherein he laboureth under the sun?' And for answer he looks at the sun rising and going down, and being in the same place after its journey through the heavens; and he hears the wind continually howling and yet returning again to its circuits; and the waters now running as rivers into the sea and again drawn up in vapours, and once more falling in rain and running as waters. This wearisome monotony of intense activity in nature is paralleled by all that is done by man under heaven, and the net result of all is 'Vanity and a strife after wind.'

The writer proceeds to confirm his dreary conclusion by a piece of autobiography put into the mouth of Solomon. He is represented as flinging himself into mirth and pleasure, into luxury and debauchery, and as satisfying every hunger for any joy, and as being pulled up short in the midst of his rioting by the conviction, like a funeral bell, tolling in his mind that all was vanity. 'He gave himself to wisdom, and madness, and folly'; and in all he found but one result

—enormous effort and no profit. There seemed to be a time for everything, and a kind of demonic power in men compelling them to toil as with equal energy, now at building up, and now at destroying. But to every purpose he saw that there was ‘time and judgment,’ and therefore, ‘the misery of man was great upon him.’ To his jaundiced eye the effort of life appeared like the play of the wind in the desert, always busy, but sometime busy in heaping the sands in hillocks, and sometimes as busy in levelling them to a plain.

We may regard such a view of humanity as grotesquely pessimistic; but there is no doubt that many of us do make of life little more than what the Preacher thought it. It is not only the victims of civilisation who are forced to wearisome monotony of toil which barely yields daily bread; but we see all around us men and women wearing out their lives in the race after a false happiness, gaining nothing by the race but weariness. What shall we say of the man who, in the desire to win wealth, or reputation, lives laborious days of cramping effort in one direction, and allows all the better part of his nature to be atrophied, and die, and passes, untasted, brooks by the way, the modest joys and delights that run through the dustiest lives. What is the difference between a squirrel in the cage who only makes his prison go round the faster by his swift race, and the man who lives toilsome days for transitory objects which he may never attain? In the old days every prison was furnished with a tread-mill, on which the prisoner being set was bound to step up on each tread of the revolving wheel, not in order to rise, but in order to prevent him from breaking his legs. How many men around us are on such a mill, and how many of them have fastened themselves on it,

and by their own misreading and misuse of life have turned it into a dreary monotony of resultless toil. The Preacher may be more ingenious than sound in his pessimism, but let us not forget that every godless man does make of life 'Vanity and strife after wind.'

II. The higher truth which completes the Preacher's.

Of course the fragmentary sentence in our second text needs to be completed from the context, and so completed will stand, 'God chastens us for our profit, that we should be partakers of His holiness.' Now let us consider for a moment the thought that the true meaning of life is *discipline*. I say discipline rather than 'chastening,' for chastening simply implies the fact of pain, whereas discipline includes the wholesome *purpose* of pain. The true meaning of life is not to be found by estimating its sorrows or its joys, but by trying to estimate the effects of either upon us. The true value of life, and the meaning of all its tears and of all its joys, is what it *makes* us. If the enormous effort which struck the Preacher issues in strengthened muscles and braced limbs, it is not 'vanity.' He who carries away with him out of life a character moulded as God would have it, does not go in all points 'naked as he came.' He bears a developed self, and that is the greatest treasure that a man can carry out of multitudinous toils of the busiest life. If we would think less of our hard work and of our heavy sorrows, and more of the loving purpose which appoints them all, we should find life less difficult, less toilsome, less mysterious. That one thought taken to our hearts, and honestly applied to everything that befalls us, would untie many a riddle, would wipe away many a tear, would bring peace and patience into many a heart, and would make still brighter many a gladness.

Without it our lives are a chaos ; with it they would become an ordered world.

But the recognition of the hand that ministers the discipline is needed to complete the peacefulness of faith. It would be a dreary world if we could only think of some inscrutable or impersonal power that inflicted the discipline ; but if in its sharpest pangs we give 'reverence to the Father of spirits,' we shall 'live.' Of course, a loving father sees to his children's education, and a loving child cannot but believe that the father's single purpose in all his discipline is his good. The good that is sought to be attained by the sharpest chastisement is better than the good that is given by weak indulgence. When the father's hand wields the rod, and a loving child receives the strokes, they may sting, but they do not wound. The 'fathers of our flesh chasten us after their own pleasure,' and there may be error and arbitrariness in their action ; and the child may sometimes nourish a right sense of injustice, but 'the Father of spirits' makes no mistakes, and never strikes too hard. 'He for our profit' carries with it the declaration that the deep heart of God doth not willingly afflict, and seeks in afflicting for nothing but His children's good.

Nor are these all the truths by which the New Testament completes and supersedes the Preacher's pessimism, for our text closes by unveiling the highest profit which discipline is meant to secure to us as being that we should be 'partakers of His holiness.' The Biblical conception of holiness in God is that of separation from and elevation above the creature. Man's holiness is separation from the world and dedication to God. He is separated from the world by moral perfection yet more than by His other attributes, and

men who have yielded themselves to Him will share in that characteristic. This assimilation to His nature is the highest 'profit' to which we can attain, and all the purpose of His chastening is to make us more completely like Himself. 'The fathers of our flesh' chasten with a view to the brief earthly life, but His chastening looks onwards beyond the days of 'strife and vanity' to a calm eternity.

Thus, then, the immortality which glimmered doubtfully in the end of his book before the eyes of the Preacher is the natural inference for the Christian thought of moral discipline as the great purpose of life. No doubt it might be possible for a man to believe in the supreme importance of character, and in all the discipline of life as subsidiary to its development, and yet not believe in another world, where all that was tendency, often thwarted, should be accomplished result, and the schooling ended the rod should be broken. But such a position will be very rare and very absurd. To recognise moral discipline as the greatest purpose of life, gives quite overwhelming probability to a future. Surely God does not take such pains with us in order to make no more of us than He makes of us in this world. Surely human life becomes 'confusion worse confounded' if it is carefully, sedulously, continuously tended, checked, inspired, developed by all the various experiences of sorrow and joy, and then, at death, broken short off, as a man might break a stick across his knee, and the fragments tossed aside and forgotten. If we can say, 'He for our profit that we might be partakers of His holiness,' we have the right to say 'We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.'

'A TIME 'TO PLANT'

'A time to plant.'—ECCLES. III. 2.

The writer enumerates in this context a number of opposite courses of conduct arranged in pairs, each of which is right at the right time. The view thus presented seems to him to be depressing, and to make life difficult to understand, and aimless. We always appear to be building up with one hand and pulling down with the other. The ship never heads for two miles together in the same direction. The history of human affairs appears to be as purposeless as the play of the wind on the desert sands, which it sometimes piles into huge mounds and then scatters.

So he concludes that only God, who appoints the seasons that demand opposite courses of conduct, can understand what it all means. The engine-driver knows why he reverses his engine, and not the wheels that are running in opposite directions in consecutive moments according to his will.

Now that is a one-sided view, of course, for it is to be remembered that the Book of Ecclesiastes is the log-book of a voyager after truth, and tells us all the wanderings and errors of his thinking until he has arrived at the haven of the conclusion that he announces in the final word: 'Hear the sum of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.'

I have nothing to do just now with the conclusion which he arrives at, but the facts from which he starts are significant and important. There are things in life, God has so arranged it, which can only be done fittingly, and for the most part of all, at certain

seasons; and the secret of success is the discernment of present duty, and the prompt performance of it.

And this is especially true about your time of life, my young friends. There are things, very important things, which, unless you do them now, the overwhelming probability is that you will never do at all; and the certainty is that you will not do them half as well. And so I want to ask you to look at these words, which, by a legitimate extension of the writer's meaning, and taking them in a kind of parabolic way, may sum up for us the whole of the special duties of youth. 'A time to plant.'

I. Now, my first remark is this: that you are now in the planting time of your lives.

No wise forester will try to shift shrubs or to put them into his gardens or woods, except in late autumn or early spring. And our lives are as really under the dominion of the law of seasons as the green world of the forest and the fields. Speaking generally, and admitting the existence of many exceptions, the years between childhood and, say, two or three-and-twenty, for a young man or woman, for the most part settle the main outline of their character, and thereby determine their history, which, after all, is mainly the outcome of their character.

You have wide possibilities before you, of moulding your characters into beauty, and purity, holiness, and strength.

For one thing, you have got no past, or next to none written all over, which it is hard to erase. You have substantially a clean sheet on which to write what you like. Your stage of life predisposes you in favour of novelty. New things are glad things to you, whereas to us older people a new thought coming into some of

our brains is like a new bit of furniture coming into a crowded room. All the other pieces need to be arranged, and it is more of a trouble than anything else. You are flexible and plastic as yet, like the iron running out of the blast furnace in a molten stream, which in half an hour's time will be a rigid bar that no man can bend.

You have all these things in your favour, and so dear young friends, whether you think of it or not, whether voluntarily or not, I want you to remember that this awful process is going on inevitably and constantly in every one of you. You are planting, whether you recognise the fact or no. What are you planting?

Well, for one thing, you are making *habits*, which are but actions hardened, like the juice that exudes from the pine-tree, liquid, or all but liquid, when it comes out, and when exposed to the air, is solidified and tenacious. The old legend of the man in the tower who got a slim thread up to his window, to which was attached one thicker and then thicker, and so on ever increasing until he hauled in a cable, is a true parable of what goes on in every human life. Some one deed, a thin film like a spider's thread, draws after it a thicker, by that inevitable law that a thing done once tends to be done twice, and that the second time it is easier than the first time. A man makes a track with great difficulty across the snow in a morning, but every time that he travels it, it is a little harder, and the track is a little broader, and it is easier walking. You play with the tiger's whelp of some pleasant, questionable enjoyment, and you think that it will always keep so innocent, with its budding claws not able to draw blood, but it grows—it grows. And it grows according

to its kind, and what was a plaything one day is a full-grown and ravening wild beast in a while. You are making habits, whatever else you are making, and you are planting in your hearts seeds that will spring and bear fruit according to their kind.

Then remember, you are planting *belief*.—Most of us, I am afraid, get our opinions by haphazard; like the child in the well-known story, whose only account of herself was that ‘she expected she grewed.’ That is the way by which most of you come to what you dignify by the name of your opinions. They come in upon you, you do not know how. Youth is receptive of anything new. You can learn a vast deal more easily than many of us older people can. Set down a man who has never learned the alphabet, to learn his letters, and see what a task it is for him. Or if he takes a pen in his hand for the first time, look how difficult the stiff wrist and thick knuckles find it to bend. Yours is the time for forming your opinions, for forming some rational and intelligent account of yourself and the world about you. See to it, that you plant truth in your hearts, under which you may live sheltered for many days.

Then again, you are planting character, which is not only habit, but something more. You are making *yourselves*, whatever else you are making. You begin with almost boundless possibilities, and these narrow and narrow and narrow, according to your actions, until you have laid the rails on which you travel—one narrow line that you cannot get off. A man’s character is, if I may use a chemical term, a ‘precipitate’ from his actions. Why, it takes acres of roses to make a flask of perfume; and all the long life of a man is represented in his ultimate character. Character is

formed like those chalk cliffs in the south, built up eight hundred feet, beetling above the stormy sea; and all made up of the relics of microscopic animals. So you build up a great solid structure—yourself—out of all your deeds. You are making your character, your habits, your opinions.—And you are making your reputation too. And you will not be able to get rid of that. This is the time for you to make a good record or a bad one, in other people's opinions.

And so, young men and women, boys and girls, I want you to remember the permanent effects of your most fleeting acts. Nothing ever dies that a man does. Nothing! You go into a museum, and you will see standing there a slab of red sandstone, and little dints and dimples upon it. What are they? Marks made by a flying shower that lasted for five minutes, nobody knows how many millenniums ago. And there they are, and there they will be until the world is burned up. So our fleeting deeds are all recorded here, in our permanent character. Everything that we have done is laid up there in the testimony of the rocks:—

‘Through our soul the echoes roll,
And grow for ever and for ever.’

You are now living in ‘a time to plant.’

II. Notice, in the next place, that as surely as *now* is the time to plant, *then* will be a time to reap.

I do not know whether the writer of my text meant the harvest, when he put in antithesis to my text the other clause, ‘and a time to pluck up that which is planted.’ Probably, as most of the other pairs are opposites, here, too, we are to see an opposite rather than a result; the destructive action of plucking up, and not the preservative action of gathering a harvest

But, however that may be, let me remind you that there stands, irrefragable, for every human soul and every human deed, this great solemn law of retribution.

Now what lies in that law? Two things—that the results are similar in kind, and more in number. The law of likeness, and the law of increase, both of them belong to the working of the law of retribution. And so, be sure that you will find out that all your past lives on into your present; and that the present, in fact, is very little more than the outcome of the past. What you plant as a youth you will reap as a man. This mysterious life of ours is all sowing and reaping intermingled, right away on to the very end. Each action is in turn the child of all the preceding and the parent of all that follows. But still, though that be true, your time of life is predominantly the time of sowing; and my time of life, for instance, is predominantly the time of reaping. There are a great many things that I could not do now if I wished. There are a great many things in our past that I, and men of my age, would fain alter; but there they stand, and nothing can do away the marks of that which once has been. We have to reap, and so will you some day.

And I will tell you what you will have to reap, as sure as you are sitting in those pews. You will have the enlarged growth of your present characteristics. A man takes a photograph upon a sensitive plate, half the size of the palm of my hand; and then he enlarges it to any size he pleases. And that is what life does for all of us. The pictures, drawn small on the young man's imagination, on the young woman's dreaming heart, be they of angels or of beasts, are permanent; and they will get bigger and bigger and bigger, as you

get older. 'You do not reap only as much as you sowed, but 'some sixty fold, and some an hundred fold.'

And you will reap the increased dominion of your early habits. There is a grim verse in the Book of Proverbs that speaks about a man being tied and bound by the chains of his sins. And that is just saying that the things which you chose to do when you were a boy, many of them you will have to do when you are a man; because you have lost the power, though sometimes not the will, of doing anything else. There be men that sow the wind, and they do not reap the wind, but the law of increase comes in and they reap the whirlwind. There be men who, according to the old Greek legend, sow dragon's teeth and they reap armed soldiers. There are some of you that are sowing to the flesh, and as sure as God lives, you will 'of the flesh reap corruption.' 'Whatsoever a man soweth, that,' even here, 'shall he also reap.'

And let me remind you that that law of inheriting the fruit of our doings is by no means exhausted by the experience of life. Whenever conscience is awakened it at once testifies not only of a broken law, but of a living Law-giver; and not only of retribution here, but of retribution hereafter. And I for my part believe that the modern form of Christianity and the tendencies of the modern pulpit, influenced by some theological discussions, about details in the notion of retribution that have been going on of late years, have operated to make ministers of the Gospel too chary of preaching, and hearers indisposed to accept, the message of 'the terror of the Lord.' My dear friends! retribution cannot stop on this side of the grave, and if you are going yonder you are carrying with you the necessity in yourself for inheriting the results of your

life here. I beseech you, do not put away such thoughts as this, with the notion that I am brandishing before you some antiquated doctrine, fit only to frighten old women and children. The writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes was no weak-minded, superstitious fanatic. He was far more disposed to scepticism than to fanaticism. But for all that, with all his sympathy for young men's breadth and liberality, with his tolerance for all sorts and ways of living, with all his doubts and questionings, he came to this, and this was his teaching to the young men whom in idea he had gathered round his chair,—'Rejoice, oh young man, in thy youth. And let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes.' By all means, God has put you into a fair world, and meant you to get all the good out of it. 'But,' and that not as a kill-joy, 'know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment,' and shape your characters accordingly.

III. Still further, let me say, these things being so, you especially need to ponder them.

That is so, because you especially are in danger of forgetting them. It is meant that young people should live by impulse much more than by reflection.

'If nature put not forth her power
About the opening of the flower,
Who is there that could live an hour?'

The days of calculation will come soon enough; and I do not want to hurry them. I do not want to put old heads upon young shoulders. I would rather see the young ones, a great deal. But I want you not to go down to the level of the beast, living only by instinct and by impulse. You have got brains, you are meant

to use them. You have the great divine gift of reason, that looks before and after, and though you have not much experience yet, you can, if you will, reflect upon such things as I have just been saying to you, and take them into your hearts, and live accordingly. My dear young friend! enjoy yourself, live buoyantly, yield to your impulses, be glad for the beautiful life that is unfolding around you, and the strong nature that is blossoming within you. And then take this other lesson, ‘Ponder the path of thy feet,’ and remember that all the while you dance along the flowery path, you are planting what you will have to reap.

Then, still further, it is especially needful for you that you should ponder these things, because unless you do you will certainly go wrong. If you do not plant good, somebody else will plant evil. An untilled field is not a field that nothing grows in, but it is a field full of weeds; and the world and the flesh and the devil, the temptations round about you and the evil tendencies in you, unless they are well kept down and kept off, are sure to fill your souls full of all manner of seeds that will spring up to bitterness, and poison, and death. Oh! think, think! for it is the only chance of keeping your hearts from being full of wickedness—think what you are sowing, and think what will the harvest be. There are some of you, as I said, sowing to the flesh, young men living impure and wicked lives, and ‘their bones are full of the sins of their youth.’ There are some of you letting every wind bring the thistledown of vanities, and scatter them all across your hearts, that they may spring up prickly, and gifted with a fatal power of self-multiplication. There are some of you, young men, and young women too, whose lives are divided between Manchester business

and that ignoble thirst for mere amusement which is eating all the dignity and the earnestness out of the young men of this city. I beseech you, do not slide into habits of frivolity, licentiousness, and sin, for want of looking after yourselves. Remember, if you do not ponder the path of your feet, you are sure to take the turn to the left.

Again, it is needful for you to ponder these things, for if you waste this time, it will never come back to you any more. It is useless to sow corn in August. There are things in this world that a man can only get when he is young, such as sound education, for instance; business habits, habits of industry, of application, of concentration, of self-control, a reputation which may avail in the future. If you do not begin to get these before you are five-and-twenty, you will never get them.

And although the certainty is not so absolute in regard to spiritual and religious things, the dice are frightfully weighted, and the chances are terribly small that a young man who, like some of you, has passed his early years in church or chapel, in weekly contact with earnest preaching, and has not accepted the Saviour, will do it when he grows old. He may; he may. But it is a great deal more likely that he will not.

IV. The conclusion of the whole matter is, Begin on the spot, to trust and to serve Jesus Christ.

These are the best things to plant—simple reliance upon His death for your forgiveness, upon His power to make you pure and clean; simple submission to His commandment. Oh! dear young friend; if you have these in your hearts everything will come right. You will get habit on your side, and that is much; and you

will be saved from a great deal of misery which would be yours if you went wrong first, and then came right.

If you will plant a cutting of the tree of life in your heart it will yield everything to you when it grows. The people in the South Seas, if they have a palm-tree, can get out of it bread and drink, food, clothing, shelter, light, materials for books, cordage for their boats, needles to sew with, and everything. If you will take Jesus Christ, and plant Him in your hearts, everything will come out of that. That Tree 'bears twelve manners of fruits, and yields His fruit every month.' With Christ in your heart all other fair things will be planted there; and with Him in your heart, all evil things which you may already have planted there, will be rooted out. Just as when some strong exotic is carried to some distant land and there takes root, it exterminates the feebler vegetation of the place to which it comes; so with Christ in my heart the sins, the evil habits, the passions, the lusts, and all other foul spawn and offspring, will die and disappear. Take Him, then, dear friend! by simple faith, for your Saviour. He will plant the good seed in your spirit, and 'instead of the briar shall come up the myrtle.' Your lives will become fruitful of goodness and of joy, according to that ancient promise: 'The righteous shall flourish like the palm-tree; he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon. Those that be planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bring forth fruit in old age.

ETERNITY IN THE HEART

'He hath made every thing beautiful in his time: also He hath set the world in their heart.'—ECCLES. iii. 11.

THERE is considerable difficulty in understanding what precise meaning is to be attached to these words, and what precise bearing they have on the general course of the writer's thoughts; but one or two things are, at any rate, quite clear.

The Preacher has been enumerating all the various vicissitudes of prosperity and adversity, of construction and destruction, of society and solitude, of love and hate, for which there is scope and verge enough in one short human life; and his conclusion is, as it always is in the earlier part of this book, that because there is such an endless diversity of possible occupation, and each of them lasts but for a little time, and its opposite has as good a right of existence as itself; therefore, perhaps, it might be as well that a man should do nothing as do all these opposite things which neutralise each other, and the net result of which is nothing. If there be a time to be born and a time to die, nonentity would be the same when all is over. If there be a time to plant and a time to pluck, what is the good of planting? If there be a time for love and a time for hate, why cherish affections which are transient and may be succeeded by their opposites?

And then another current of thought passes through his mind, and he gets another glimpse somewhat different, and says in effect, 'No! that is not all true—God has made all these different changes, and although each of them seems contradictory of the

other, in its own place and at its own time each is beautiful and has a right to exist.' The contexture of life, and even the perplexities and darkneses of human society, and the varieties of earthly condition—if they be confined within their own proper limits, and regarded as parts of a whole—they are all co-operant to an end. As from wheels turning different ways in some great complicated machine, and yet fitting by their cogs into one another, there may be a resultant direct motion produced even by these apparently antagonistic forces.

But the second clause of our text adds a thought which is in some sense contrasted with this.

The word rendered 'world' is a very frequent one in the Old Testament, and has never but one meaning, and that meaning is *eternity*. 'He hath set *eternity* in their heart.'

Here, then, are two antagonistic facts. They are transient things, a vicissitude which moves within natural limits, temporary events which are beautiful in their season. But there is also the contrasted fact, that the man who is thus tossed about, as by some great battledore wielded by giant powers in mockery, from one changing thing to another, has relations to something more lasting than the transient. He lives in a world of fleeting change, but he has 'eternity' in 'his heart.' So between him and his dwelling-place, between him and his occupations, there is a gulf of disproportion. He is subjected to these alternations, and yet bears within him a repressed but immortal consciousness that he belongs to another order of things, which knows no vicissitude and fears no decay. He possesses stifled and misinterpreted longings which, however starved, do yet survive, after unchanging

Being and eternal Rest. And thus endowed, and by contrast thus situated, his soul is full of the 'blank misgiving of a creature moving about in worlds not realised.' Out of these two facts—says our text—man's *where* and man's *what*, his nature and his position, there rises a mist of perplexity and darkness that wraps the whole course of the divine actions—unless, indeed, we have reached that central height of vision above the mists, which this Book of Ecclesiastes puts forth at last as the conclusion of the whole matter—'Fear God, and keep His commandments.' If transitory things with their multitudinous and successive waves toss us to solid safety on the Rock of Ages, then all is well, and many mysteries will be clear. But if not, if we have not found, or rather followed, the one God-given way of harmonising these two sets of experiences—life in the transient, and longings for the eternal—then their antagonism darkens our thoughts of a wise and loving Providence, and we have lost the key to the confused riddle which the world then presents. 'He hath made everything beautiful in his time: also He hath set Eternity in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end.'

Such, then, being a partial but, perhaps, not entirely inadequate view of the course of thought in the words before us, I may now proceed to expand the considerations thus brought under our notice in them. These may be gathered up in three principal ones: the consciousness of Eternity in every heart; the disproportion thence resulting between this nature of ours and the order of things in which we dwell; and finally, the possible satisfying of that longing in men's hearts—a possibility not indeed referred to in our text, but

unveiled as the final word of this Book of Ecclesiastes, and made clear to *us* in Jesus Christ.

I. Consider that eternity is set in every human heart.

The expression is, of course, somewhat difficult, even if we accept generally the explanation which I have given. It may be either a declaration of the actual immortality of the soul, or it may mean, as I rather suppose it to do, the consciousness of eternity which is part of human nature.

The former idea is no doubt closely connected with the latter, and would here yield an appropriate sense. We should then have the contrast between man's undying existence and the transient trifles on which he is tempted to fix his love and hopes. We belong to one set of existences by our bodies, and to another by our souls. Though we are parts of the passing material world, yet in that outward frame is lodged a personality that has nothing in common with decay and death. A spark of eternity dwells in these fleeting frames. The laws of physical growth and accretion and maturity and decay, which rule over all things material, do not apply to my true self. 'In our embers is something that doth live.' Whatsoever befalls the hairs that get grey and thin, and the hands that become wrinkled and palsied, and the heart that is worn out by much beating, and the blood that clogs and clots at last, and the filmy eye, and all the corruptible frame; yet, as the heathen said, 'I shall not *all* die,' but deep within this transient clay house, that must crack and fall and be resolved into the elements out of which it was built up, there dwells an immortal guest, an undying personal self. In the heart, the inmost spiritual being of every man, eternity, in this sense of the word, does dwell.

'Commonplaces,' you say. Yes; commonplaces, which word means two things—truths that affect us all, and also truths which, because they are so universal and so entirely believed, are all but powerless. Surely it is not time to stop preaching such truths as long as they are forgotten by the overwhelming majority of the people who acknowledge them. Thank God! the staple of the work of us preachers is the reiteration of commonplaces, which His goodness has made familiar, and our indolence and sin have made stale and powerless.

My brother! you would be a wiser man if, instead of turning the edge of statements which you know to be true, and which, if true, are infinitely solemn and important, by commonplace sarcasm about pulpit commonplaces, you would honestly try to drive the familiar neglected truth home to your mind and heart. Strip it of its generality and think, '*It is true about me. I live for ever. My outward life will cease, and my dust will return to dust—but I shall last undying.*' And ask yourselves—What then? '*Am I making "provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof," in more or less refined fashion, and forgetting to provide for that which lives for evermore? Eternity is in my heart. What a madness it is to go on, as if either I were to continue for ever among the shows of time, or when I leave them all, to die wholly and be done with altogether!*'

But, probably, the other interpretation of these words is the truer. The doctrine of immortality does not seem to be stated in this Book of Ecclesiastes, except in one or two very doubtful expressions. And it is more in accordance with its whole tone to suppose the Preacher here to be asserting, not that the heart

or spirit is immortal, but that, whether it is or no, in the heart is planted the *thought*, the *consciousness* of eternity—and the longing after it.

Let me put that into other words. We, brethren are the only beings on this earth who can think the thought and speak the word—Eternity. Other creatures are happy while immersed in time; we have another nature, and are disturbed by a thought which shines high above the roaring sea of circumstance in which we float.

I do not care at present about the metaphysical puzzles that have been gathered round that conception, nor care to ask whether it is positive or negative, adequate or inadequate. Enough that the word has a meaning, that it corresponds to a thought which dwells in men's minds. It is of no consequence at all for our purpose, whether it is a positive conception, or simply the thinking away of all limitations. 'I know what God is, when you do not ask me.' I know what eternity is, though I cannot define the word to satisfy a metaphysician. The little child taught by some grandmother Lois, in a cottage, knows what she means when she tells him 'you will live for ever,' though both scholar and teacher would be puzzled to put it into other words. When we say eternity flows round this bank and shoal of time, men know what we mean. Heart answers to heart; and in each heart lies that solemn thought—for ever!

Like all other of the primal thoughts of men's souls, it may be increased in force and clearness, or it may be neglected and opposed, and all but crushed. The thought of God is natural to man, the thought of right and wrong is natural to man—and yet there may be atheists who have blinded their eyes, and there may be

degraded and almost animal natures who have seared their consciences and called sweet bitter and evil good. Thus men may so plunge themselves into the present as to lose the consciousness of the eternal—as a man swept over Niagara, blinded by the spray and deafened by the rush, would see or hear nothing outside the green walls of the death that encompassed him. And yet the blue sky with its peaceful spaces stretches above the hell of waters.

So the thought is in us all—a presentiment and a consciousness; and that universal presentiment itself goes far to establish the reality of the unseen order of things to which it is directed. The great planet that moves on the outmost circle of our system was discovered because that next it wavered in its course in a fashion which was inexplicable, unless some unknown mass was attracting it from across millions of miles of darkling space. And there are ‘perturbations’ in our spirits which cannot be understood, unless from them we may divine that far-off and unseen world, that has power from afar to sway in their orbits the little lives of mortal men. It draws us to itself—but, alas! the attraction may be resisted and thwarted. The dead mass of the planet bends to the drawing, but we can repel the constraint which the eternal world would exercise upon us—and so that consciousness which ought to be our nobleness, as it is our prerogative, may become our shame, our misery, and our sin.

That Eternity which is set in our hearts is not merely the thought of ever-during Being, or of an everlasting order of things to which we are in some way related. But there are connected with it other ideas besides those of mere duration. Men know what

perfection means. They understand the meaning of perfect goodness; they have the notion of infinite Wisdom and boundless Love. These thoughts are the material of all poetry, the thread from which the imagination creates all her wondrous tapestries. This 'capacity for the Infinite,' as people call it—which is only a fine way of putting the same thought as that in our text—which is the prerogative of human spirits, is likewise the curse of many spirits. By their misuse of it they make it a fatal gift, and turn it into an unsatisfied desire which gnaws their souls, a famished yearning which 'roars, and suffers hunger.' Knowing what perfection is, they turn to limited natures and created hearts for their rest. Having the haunting thought of an absolute Goodness, a perfect Wisdom, an endless Love, an eternal Life—they try to find the being that corresponds to their thought here on earth, and so they are plagued with endless disappointment.

My brother! God has put eternity in *your* heart. Not only will you live for ever, but also in your present life you have a consciousness of that eternal and infinite and all-sufficient Being that lives above. You have need of Him, and whether you know it or not, the tendrils of your spirits, like some climbing plant not fostered by a careful hand but growing wild, are feeling out into the vacancy in order to grasp the stay which they need for their fruitage and their strength.

By the make of our spirits, by the possibilities that dawn dim before us, by the thoughts 'whose very sweetness yieldeth proof that they were born for immortality,'—by all these and a thousand other signs and facts in every human life we say, 'God has set eternity in their hearts!'

II. And then turn to the second idea that is here. The disproportion between this our nature, and the world in which we dwell.

The writer of this book (whether Solomon or no we need not stay to discuss) looks out upon the world; and in accordance with the prevailing tone of all the earlier parts of his contemplations, finds in this prerogative of man but another reason for saying, 'All is vanity and vexation of spirit.'

Two facts meet him antagonistic to one another: the place that man occupies, and the nature that man bears. This creature with eternity in his heart, where is he set? what has he got to work upon? what has he to love and hold by, to trust to, and anchor his life on? A crowd of things, each well enough, but each having a *time*—and though they be beautiful in their time, yet fading and vanishing when it has elapsed. No multiplication of *times* will make *eternity*. And so with that thought in his heart, man is driven out among objects perfectly insufficient to meet it.

Christ said, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man hath not where to lay His head'—and while the words have their proper and most pathetic meaning in the history of His own earthly life of travail and toil for our sakes, we may also venture to give them the further application, that all the lower creatures are at rest here, and that the more truly a man is man, the less can he find, among all the shadows of the present, a pillow for his head, a place of repose for his heart. The animal nature is at home in the material world, the human nature is not.

Every other creature presents the most accurate correspondence between nature and circumstances,

powers and occupations. Man alone is like some poor land-bird blown out to sea, and floating half-drowned with clinging plumage on an ocean where the dove 'finds no rest for the sole of her foot,' or like some creature that loves to glance in the sunlight, but is plunged into the deepest recesses of a dark mine. In the midst of a universe marked by the nicest adaptations of creatures to their habitation, man alone, the head of them all, presents the unheard-of anomaly that he is surrounded by conditions which do *not* fit his whole nature, which are not adequate for all his powers, on which he cannot feed and nurture his whole being. 'To what purpose is this waste?' 'Hast thou made all men in vain?'

Everything is 'beautiful in its time.' Yes, and for that very reason, as this Book of Ecclesiastes says in another verse, 'Because to every purpose there is time and judgment, therefore the misery of man is great upon him.' It was happy when we loved; but the day of indifference and alienation and separation comes. Our spirits were glad when we were planting; but the time for plucking up that which was planted is sure to draw near. It was blessed to pour out our souls in the effluence of love, or in the fullness of thought, and the time to speak was joyous; but the dark day of silence comes on. When we twined hearts and clasped hands together it was glad, and the time when we embraced was blessed; but the time to refrain from embracing is as sure to draw near. It is good for the eyes to behold the sun, but so certainly as it rolls to its bed in the west, and 'leaves the world to darkness' and to us, do all earthly occupations wane and fade, and all possessions shrivel and dwindle, and all associations snap and drop and end, and the

whirligig of time works round and takes away everything which it once brought us.

And so man, with eternity in his heart, with the hunger in his spirit after an unchanging whole, an absolute good, an ideal perfectness, an immortal being—is condemned to the treadmill of transitory revolution. Nothing continueth in one stay, 'For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof.' It is limited, it is changeful, it slips from under us as we stand upon it, and therefore, mystery and perplexity stoop down upon the providence of God, and misery and loneliness enter into the heart of man. These changeful things, they do not meet our ideal, they do not satisfy our wants, they do not last even our duration.

'The misery of man is great upon him,' said the text quoted a moment ago. And is it not? Is this present life enough for you? Sometimes you fancy it is. Many of us habitually act on the understanding that it is, and treat all that I have been saying about the disproportion between our nature and our circumstances as not true about them. 'This world not enough for me!' you say—'Yes! it is; only let me get a little more of it, and keep what I get, and I shall be all right.' So then—'a little more' is wanted, is it? And that 'little more' will always be wanted, and besides it, the guarantee of permanence will always be wanted, and failing these, there will be a hunger that nothing can fill which belongs to earth. Do you remember the bitter experience of the poor prodigal, 'he *would fain* have filled his belly with the husks'? He tried his best to live upon the horny, innutritious

poets, but he could not; and after them he still was 'perishing with hunger.' So it is with us all when we try to fill the soul and satisfy the spirit with earth or aught that holds of it. It is as impossible to still the hunger of the heart with that, as to stay the hunger of the body with wise sayings or noble sentiments.

I appeal to your real selves, to your own past experience. Is it not true that, deep below the surface contentment with the world and the things of the world, a dormant but slightly slumbering sense of want and unsatisfied need lies in your souls? Is it not true that it wakes sometimes at a touch; that the tender, dying light of sunset, or the calm abysses of the mighty heavens, or some strain of music, or a line in a book, or a sorrow in your heart, or the solemnity of a great joy, or close contact with sickness and death, or the more direct appeals of Scripture and of Christ, stir a wistful yearning and a painful sense of emptiness in your hearts, and of insufficiency in all the ordinary pursuits of your lives? It cannot but be so; for though it be true that our natures are in some measure subdued to what we work in, and although it is possible to atrophy the deepest parts of our being by long neglect or starvation, yet you will never do that so thoroughly but that the deep-seated longing will break forth at intervals, and the cry of its hunger echo through the soul. Many of us do our best to silence it. But I, for my part, believe that, however you have crushed and hardened your souls by indifference, by ambition, by worldly cares, by frivolous or coarse pleasures, or by any of the thousand other ways in which you can do it—yet there is some response in your truest self to my poor

words when I declare that a soul without God is an empty and an aching soul!

These things which, even in their time of beauty, are not enough for a man's soul—have all but a time to be beautiful in, and then they fade and die. A great botanist made what he called 'a floral clock' to mark the hours of the day by the opening and closing of flowers. It was a graceful and yet a pathetic thought. One after another they spread their petals, and their varying colours glow in the light. But one after another they wearily shut their cups, and the night falls, and the latest of them folds itself together, and all are hidden away in the dark. So our joys and treasures, were they sufficient did they last, cannot last. After a summer's day comes a summer's night, and after a brief space of them comes winter, when all are killed and the leafless trees stand silent,

'Bare, ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.'

We cleave to these temporal possessions and joys, and the natural law of change sweeps them away from us one by one. Most of them do not last so long as we do, and they pain us when *they* pass away from us. Some of them last longer than we do, and *they* pain us when we pass away from them. Either way our hold of them is a transient hold, and one knows not whether is the sadder—the bare garden beds where all have done blowing, and nothing remains but a tangle of decay, or the blooming beauty from which a man is summoned away, leaving others to reap what he has sown. Tragic enough are both at the best—and certain to befall us all. We live and they fade; we die and they remain. We live again and they are far away. The facts are so. We may

make them a joy or a sorrow as we will. Transiency is stamped on all our possessions, occupations, and delights. We have the hunger for eternity in our souls, the thought of eternity in our hearts, the destination for eternity written on our inmost being, and the need to ally ourselves with eternity proclaimed even by the most short-lived trifles of time. Either these things will be the blessing or the curse of our lives. Which do you mean that they shall be for you?

III. These thoughts lead us to consider the possible satisfying of our souls.

This Book of Ecclesiastes is rather meant to enforce the truth of the weariness and emptiness of a godless life, than of the blessedness of a godly one. It is the record of the struggles of a soul—‘the confessions of an inquiring spirit’—feeling and fighting its way through many errors, and many partial and unsatisfactory solutions of the great problem of life, till he reaches the one in which he can rest. When he has touched that goal his work is done. And so the devious way is told in the book at full length, while a sentence sets forth the conclusion to which he was working, even when he was most bewildered. ‘The conclusion of the whole matter’ is ‘Fear God and keep His commandments.’ That is all that a man needs. It is ‘the whole of man.’ ‘All is’ *not* ‘vanity and vexation of spirit’ *then*—but ‘all things work together for good to them that love God.’

The Preacher in his day learned that it was possible to satisfy the hunger for eternity, which had once seemed to him a questionable blessing. He learned that it was a loving Providence which had made man’s home so little fit for him, that he might seek the ‘city which hath foundations.’ He learned that all the pain

of passing beauty, and the fading flowers of man's goodness, were capable of being turned into a solemn joy. Standing at the centre, he saw order instead of chaos, and when he had come back, after all his search, to the old simple faith of peasants and children in Judah, to fear God and keep His commandments, he understood why God had set eternity in man's heart, and then flung him out, as if in mockery, amidst the stormy waves of the changeful ocean of time.

And we, who have a further word from God, may have a fuller and yet more blessed conviction, built upon our own happy experience, if we choose, that it is possible for us to have that deep thirst slaked, that longing appeased. We have Christ to trust to and to love. He has given Himself for us that all our many sins against the eternal love and our guilty squandering of our hearts upon transitory treasures may be forgiven. He has come amongst us, the Word in human flesh, that our poor eyes may see the Eternal walking amidst the things of time and sense, and may discern a beauty in Him beyond 'whatsoever things are lovely.' He has come that we through Him may lay hold on God, even as in Him God lays hold on us. As in mysterious and transcendent union the divine takes into itself the human in that person of Jesus, and Eternity is blended with Time; we, trusting Him and yielding our hearts to Him, receive into our poor lives an incorruptible seed, and for us the soul-satisfying realities that abide for ever mingle with and are reached through the shadows that pass away.

Brethren, yield yourselves to Him! In conscious unworthiness, in lowly penitence, let us cast ourselves on Jesus Christ, our Sacrifice, for pardon and peace! Trust Him and love Him! Live by Him and for Him!

And then, the loftiest thoughts of our hearts, as they seek after absolute perfection and changeless love, shall be more than fulfilled in Him who is more than all that man ever dreamed, because He is the perfection of man, and the Son of God.

Love Christ and live in Him, taking Him for the motive, the spring, and the very atmosphere of your lives, and then no capacities will languish for lack of either stimulus or field, and no weariness will come over you, as if you were a stranger from your home. For if Christ be near us, all things go well with us. If we live for Him, the power of that motive will make all our nature blossom like the vernal woods, and dry branches break into leafage. If we dwell in Him, we shall be at home wherever we are, like the patriarch who pitched his tent in many lands, but always had the same tent wherever he went. So we shall have the one abode, though its place in the desert may vary—and we shall not need to care whether the encampment be beneath the palm-trees and beside the wells of Elim, or amidst the drought of Marah, so long as the same covering protects us, and the same pillar of fire burns above us.

Love Christ, and then the eternity in the heart will not be a great aching void, but will be filled with the everlasting life which Christ gives, and is. The vicissitude will really become the source of freshness and progress which God meant it to be. Everything which, when made our all-sufficient portion, becomes stale and unprofitable, even in its time, will be apparelled in celestial light. It shall all be lovely and pleasant while it lasts, and its beauty will not be saddened by the certainty of its decay, nor its empty place a pain when it has passed away.

Take Christ for Saviour and Friend, your Guide and Support through time, and Himself your Eternity and Joy, then all discords are reconciled—and ‘all things are yours—whether the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours, and ye are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.’

LESSONS FOR WORSHIP AND FOR WORK

‘Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil. 2. Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth; therefore let thy words be few. 3. For a dream cometh through the multitude of business; and a fool’s voice is known by multitude of words. 4. When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for He hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed. 5. Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay. 6. Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin; neither say thou before the angel, that it was an error: wherefore should God be angry at thy voice, and destroy the work of thine hands? 7. For in the multitude of dreams and many words there are also divers vanities: but fear thou God. 8. If thou seest the oppression of the poor, and violent perverting of judgment and justice in a province, marvel not at the matter: for he that is higher than the highest regardeth; and there be higher than they. 9. Moreover, the profit of the earth is for all: the king himself is served by the field. 10. He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase. This is also vanity. 11. When goods increase, they are increased that eat them: and what good is there to the owners thereof, saving the beholding of them with their eyes? 12. The sleep of a labouring man is sweet, whether he eat little or much: but the abundance of the rich will not suffer him to sleep.’—ECCLES. v. 1-12.

THIS passage is composed of two or perhaps three apparently disconnected sections. The faults in worship referred to in verses 1-7 have nothing to do with the legalised robbery of verse 8, nor has the demonstration of the folly of covetousness in verses 10-12 any connection with either of the preceding subjects. But they are brought into unity, if they are taken as applications in different directions of the bitter truth which the writer sets himself to prove runs through all life. ‘All is vanity.’ That principle may even be exemplified in worship, and the obscure verse 7 which closes the

section about the faults of worship seems to be equivalent to the more familiar close which rings the knell of so many of men's pursuits in this book, 'This also is vanity.' It stands in the usual form in verse 10.

We have in verses 1-7 a warning against the faults in worship which make even it to be 'vanity,' unreal and empty and fruitless. These are of three sorts, arranged, as it were, chronologically. The worshipper is first regarded as going to the house of God, then as presenting his prayers in it, and then as having left it and returned to his ordinary life. The writer has cautions to give concerning conduct before, during, and after public worship.

Note that, in all three parts of his warnings, his favourite word of condemnation appears as describing the vain worship to which he opposes the right manner. They who fall into the faults condemned are 'fools.' If that class includes all who mar their worship by such errors, the church which holds them had need to be of huge dimensions; for the faults held up in these ancient words flourish in full luxuriance to-day, and seem to haunt long-established Christianity quite as mischievously as they did long-established Judaism. If we could banish them from our religious assemblies, there would be fewer complaints of the poor results of so much apparently Christian prayer and preaching.

Fruitful and acceptable worship begins before it begins. So our passage commences with the demeanour of the worshipper on his way to the house of God. He is to keep his foot; that is, to go deliberately, thoughtfully, with realisation of what he is about to do. He is to 'draw near to hear' and to bethink himself, while drawing near, of what his purpose should be.

Our forefathers' Sunday began on Saturday night, and partly for that reason the hallowing influence of it ran over into Monday, at all events. What likelihood is there that much good will come of worship to people who talk politics or scandal right up to the church door? Is reading newspapers in the pews, which they tell us in England is not unknown in America, a good preparation for worshipping God? The heaviest rain runs off parched ground, unless it has been first softened by a gentle fall of moisture. Hearts that have no dew of previous meditation to make them receptive are not likely to drink in much of the showers of blessing which may be falling round them. The formal worshipper who goes to the house of God because it is the hour when he has always gone; the curious worshipper (?) who draws near to hear indeed, but to hear a man, not God; and all the other sorts of mere outward worshippers who make so large a proportion of every Christian congregation—get the lesson they need, to begin with, in this precept.

Note, that right preparation for worship is better than worship itself, if it is that of 'fools.' Drawing near with the true purpose is better than being near with the wrong one. Note, too, the reason for the vanity of the 'sacrifice of fools' is that 'they know not'; and why do they not know, but because they did not draw near with the purpose of hearing? Therefore, as the last clause of the verse says, rightly rendered, 'they do evil.' All hangs together. No matter how much we frequent the house of God, if we go with unprepared minds and hearts we shall remain ignorant, and because we are so, our sacrifices will be 'evil.' If the winnowing fan of this principle were applied to our decorous congregations, who dress their bodies for

church much more carefully than they do their souls, what a cloud of chaff would fly off!

Then comes the direction for conduct in the act of worship. The same thoughtfulness which kept the foot in coming to, should keep the heart when in, the house of God. His exaltation and our lowliness should check hasty words, blurting out uppermost wishes, or in any way outrunning the sentiments and emotions of prepared hearts. Not that the lesson would check the fervid flow of real desire. There is a type of calm worship which keeps itself calm because it is cold. Propriety and sobriety are its watchwords—both admirable things, and both dear to tepid Christians. Other people besides the crowds on Pentecost think that men whose lips are fired by the Spirit of God are ‘drunken,’ if not with wine, at all events with unwholesome enthusiasm. But the outpourings of a soul filled, not only with the sense that God is in heaven and we on earth, but also with the assurance that He is near to it, and it to Him, are not rash and hasty, however fervid. What is condemned is words which travel faster than thoughts or feelings, or which proceed from hearts that have not been brought into patient submission, or from such as lack reverent realisation of God’s majesty; and such faults may attach to the most calm worship, and need not infect the most fervent. Those prayers are not hasty which keep step with the suppliant’s desires, when these take the time from God’s promises. That mouth is not rash which waits to speak until the ear has heard.

‘Let thy words be few.’ The heathen ‘think that they shall be heard for much speaking.’ It needs not to tell our wants in many words to One who knows them altogether, any more than a child needs many

when speaking to a father or mother. But 'few' must be measured by the number of needs and desires. The shortest prayer, which is not animated by a consciousness of need and a throb of desire, is too long; the longest, which is vitalised by these, is short enough. What becomes of the enormous percentage of public and private prayers, which are mere repetitions, said because they are the right thing to say, because everybody always has said them, and not because the man praying really wants the things he asks for, or expects to get them any the more for asking?

Verse 3 gives a reason for the exhortation, 'A dream comes through a multitude of business'—when a man is much occupied with any matter, it is apt to haunt his sleeping as well as his waking thoughts. 'A fool's voice comes through a multitude of words.' The dream is the consequence of the pressure of business, but the fool's voice is the cause, not the consequence, of the gush of words. What, then, is the meaning? Probably that such a gush of words turns, as it were, the voice of the utterer, for the time being, into that of a fool. Voluble prayers, more abundant than devout sentiments or emotions, make the offerer as a 'fool' and his prayer unacceptable.

The third direction refers to conduct after worship. It lays down the general principle that vows should be paid, and that swiftly. A keen insight into human nature suggests the importance of prompt fulfilment of the vows; for in carrying out resolutions formed under the impulse of the sanctuary, even more than in other departments, delays are dangerous. Many a young heart touched by the truth has resolved to live a Christian life, and has gone out from the house of God and put off and put off till days have thickened

into months and years, and the intention has remained unfulfilled for ever. Nothing hardens hearts, stiffens wills, and sears consciences so much as to be brought to the point of melting, and then to cool down into the old shape. All good resolutions and spiritual convictions may be included under the name of vows; and of all it is true that it is better not to have formed them, than to have formed and not performed them.

Verses 6 and 7 are obscure. The former seems to refer to the case of a man who vows and then asks that he may be absolved from his vow by the priest or other ecclesiastical authority. His mouth—that is, his spoken promise—leads him into sin, if he does not fulfil it (comp. Deut. xxiii. 21, 22). He asks release from his promise on the ground that it is a sin of weakness. The ‘angel’ is best understood as the priest (messenger), as in Malachi ii. 7. Such a wriggling out of a vow will bring God’s anger; for the ‘voice’ which promised what the hand will not perform, sins.

Verse 7 is variously rendered. The Revised Version supplies at the beginning, ‘This comes to pass,’ and goes on ‘through the multitude of dreams and vanities and many words.’ But this scarcely bears upon the context, which requires here a reason against rash speech and vows. The meaning seems better given, either by the rearranged text which Delitzsch suggests, ‘In many dreams and many words there are also many vanities’ (so, substantially, the Auth. Ver.), or as Wright, following Hitzig, etc., has it, ‘In the multitude of dreams are also vanities, and [in] many words [as well].’ The simile of verse 3 is recurred to, and the whirling visions of unsubstantial dreams are likened to the rash words of voluble prayers in that both are

vanity. Thus the writer reaches his favourite thought, and shows how vanity infects even devotion. The closing injunction to 'fear God' sets in sharp contrast with faulty outward worship the inner surrender and devotion, which will protect against such empty hypocrisy. If the heart is right, the lips will not be far wrong.

Verses 8 and 9 have no direct connection with the preceding, and their connection with the following (vs. 10-12) is slight. Their meaning is dubious. According to the prevailing view now, the abuses of government in verse 8 are those of the period of the writer; and the last clauses do not, as might appear at first reading, console sufferers by the thought that God is above rapacious dignitaries, but bids the readers not be surprised if small officials plunder, since the same corruption goes upwards through all grades of functionaries. With such rotten condition of things is contrasted, in verse 9, the happy state of a people living under a patriarchal government, where the king draws his revenues, not from oppression, but from agriculture. The Revised Version gives in its margin this rendering. The connection of these verses with the following may be that they teach the vanity of riches under such a state of society as they describe. What is the use of scraping wealth together when hungry officials are 'watching' to pounce on it? How much better to be contented with the modest prosperity of a quiet country life! If the translation of verse 9 in the Authorised Version and the Revised Version is retained, there is a striking contrast between the rapine of the city, where men live by preying on each other (as they do still to a large extent, for commerce' is often nothing better), and the wholesome

natural life of the country, where the kindly earth yields fruit, and one man's gain is not another's loss.

Thus the verses may be connected with the wise depreciation of money which follows. That low estimate is based on three grounds, which great trading nations like England and the United States need to have dinned into their ears. First, no man ever gets enough of worldly wealth. The appetite grows faster than the balance at the banker's. That is so because the desire that is turned to outward wealth really needs something else, and has mistaken its object. God, not money or money's worth, is the satisfying possession. It is so because all appetites, fed on earthly things, increase by gratification, and demand ever larger draughts. The jaded palate needs stronger stimulants. The seasoned opium-eater has to increase his doses to produce the same effects. Second, the race after riches is a race after a phantom, because the more one has of them the more people there spring up to share them. The poor man does with one servant; the rich man has fifty; and his own portion of his wealth is a very small item. His own meal is but a small slice off the immense provisions for which he has the trouble of paying. It is so, thirdly, because in the chase he deranges his physical nature; and when he has got his wealth, it only keeps him awake at night thinking how he shall guard it and keep it safe.

That which costs so much to get, which has so little power to satisfy, which must always be less than the wish of the covetous man, which costs so much to keep, which stuffs pillows with thorns, is surely vanity. Honest work is rewarded by sweet sleep. The old legend told of unslumbering guards who kept the treasure of the golden fruit. The millionaire has to

live in a barred house, and to be always on the lookout lest some combination of speculators should pull down his stocks, or some change in the current of population should make his city lots worthless. Black care rides behind the successful man of business. Better to have done a day's work which has earned a night's repose than to be the slave of one's wealth, as all men are who make it their aim and their supreme good. Would that these lessons were printed deep on the hearts of young Englishmen and Americans!

NAKED OR CLOTHED?

'As he came forth of his mother's womb, naked shall he return to go as he came, and shall take nothing of his labour, which he may carry away in his hand.'—ECCLES. v. 15.

'... Their works do follow them.'—REV. xiv. 13.

It is to be observed that these two sharply contrasted texts do not refer to the same persons. The former is spoken of a rich worldling, the latter of 'the dead who die in the Lord.' The unrelieved gloom of the one is as a dark background against which the triumphant assurance of the other shines out the more brightly, and deepens the gloom which heightens it. The end of the man who has to go away from earth naked and empty-handed acquires new tragic force when set against the lot of those 'whose works do follow them.' Well-worn and commonplace as both sets of thought may be, they may perhaps be flashed up into new vividness by juxtaposition; and if in this sermon we have nothing new to say, old truth is not out of place till it has been wrought into and influenced our daily practice. We shall best gather the lessons of our text if we consider what we must leave, what we must take, and what we may take.

I. What we must leave.

The Preacher in the context presses home a formidable array of the limitations and insufficiencies of wealth. Possessed, it cannot satisfy, for the appetite grows with indulgence. Its increase barely keeps pace with the increase of its consumers. It contributes nothing to the advantage of its so-called owner except 'the beholding of it with his eyes,' and the need of watching it keeps them open when he would fain sleep. It is often kept to the owner's hurt, it often disappears in unfortunate speculation, and the possessor's heirs are paupers. But, even if all these possibilities are safely weathered, the man has to die and leave it all behind. 'He shall take nothing of his labour which he can carry away in his hand'; that is to say, death separates from all with whom the life of the body brings us into connection. The things which are no parts of our true selves are ours in a very modified sense even whilst we seem to possess them, and the term of possession has a definite close. 'Shrouds have no pockets,' as the stern old proverb says. How many men have lived in the houses which we call ours, sat on our seats, walked over our lands, carried in their purses the money that is in ours! Is 'the game worth the candle' when we give our labour for so imperfect and brief a possession as at the fullest and the longest we enjoy of all earthly good? Surely a wise man will set little store by possessions of all which a cold, irresistible hand will come to strip him. Surely the life is wasted which spends its energy in robing itself in garments which will all be stripped from it when the naked self 'returns to go as he came.'

But there are other things than these earthly possessions from which death separates us. It carries us

far away from the sound of human voices and isolates us from living men. Honour and reputation cease to be audible. When a prominent man dies, what a clatter of conflicting judgments contends over his grave! and how utterly he is beyond them all! Praise or blame, blessing or banning are equally powerless to reach the unhearing ear or to agitate the unbeating heart. And when one of our small selves passes out of life, we hear no more the voice of censure or of praise, of love or of hate. Is it worth while to toil for the 'hollow wraith of dying fame,' or even for the clasp of loving hands which have to be loosened so surely and so soon?

Then again, there are other things which must be left behind as belonging only to the present order, and connected with bodily life. There will be no scope for material work, and much of all our knowledge will be antiquated when the light beyond shines in. As we shall have occasion to see presently, there is a permanent element in the most material work, and if in handling the transient we have been living for the eternal, such work will abide; but if we think of the spirit in which a sad majority do their daily tasks, whether of a more material or of a more intellectual sort, we must recognise that a very large proportion of all the business of life must come to an end here. There is nothing in it that will stand the voyage across the great deep, or that can survive in the order of things to which we go. What is a man to do in another world, supposing there is another world, where ledgers and mills are out of date? Or what has a scholar or scientist to do in a state of things where there is no place for dictionaries and grammars, for acute criticism, or for a careful scientific research?

Physical science, linguistic knowledge, political wisdom, will be antiquated. The poetry which glorifies afresh and interprets the present will have lost its meaning. Half the problems that torture us here will cease to have existence, and most of the other half will have been solved by simple change of position. 'Whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away'; and it becomes us all to bethink ourselves whether there is anything in our lives that we can carry away when all that is 'of the earth earthy' has sunk into nothingness.

II. What we must take.

We must take *ourselves*. It is the same 'he' who goes 'naked as he came'; it is the same 'he' who 'came from his mother's womb,' and is 'born again' as it were into a new life, only 'he' has by his earthly life been developed and revealed. The plant has flowered and fruited. What was mere potentiality has become fact. There is now fixed character. The transient possessions, relationships, and occupations of the earthly life are gone, but the man that they have made is there. And in the character there are predominant habits which insist upon having their sway, and a memory of which, as we may believe, there is written indelibly all the past. Whatever death may strip from us, there is no reason to suppose that it touches the consciousness and personal identity, or the prevailing set and inclination of our characters. And if we do indeed pass into another life 'not in entire forgetfulness, and not in utter nakedness,' but carrying a perfected memory and clothed in a garment woven of all our past actions, there needs no more to bring about a solemn and continuous act of judgment.

III. What we may take.

'Their works do follow them.' These are the words of the Spirit concerning 'the dead who die in the Lord.' We need not fear marring the great truth that 'not by works of righteousness but by His mercy He saved us,' if we firmly grasp the large assurance which this text blessedly contains. A Christian man's works are perpetual in the measure in which they harmonise with the divine will, in the measure they have eternal consequences in himself whatever they may have on others. If we live opening our minds and hearts to the influx of the divine power 'that worketh in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure,' then we may be humbly sure that these 'works' are eternal; and though they will never constitute the ground of our acceptance, they will never fail to secure 'a great recompence of reward.' To many a humble saint there will be a moment of wondering thankfulness when he sees these his 'children whom God hath given him' clustered round him, and has to say, 'Lord, when saw I Thee naked, or in prison, and visited Thee?' There will be many an apocalypse of grateful surprise in the revelations of the heavens. We remember Milton's noble explanation of these great words which may well silence our feeble attempts to enforce them—

'Thy works and alms and all thy good endeavour
Stood not behind, nor in the grave were trod,
But as faith pointed with her golden rod,
Followed them up to joy and bliss for ever.'

So then, life here and yonder will for the Christian soul be one continuous whole, only that there, while 'their works do follow them,' 'they rest from their labours.'

FINIS CORONAT OPUS

'Better is the end of a thing than the beginning.'—ECCLES. vii. 1.

THIS Book of Ecclesiastes is the record of a quest after the chief good. The Preacher tries one thing after another, and tells his experiences. Amongst these are many blunders. It is the final lesson which he would have us learn, not the errors through which he reached it. 'The conclusion of the whole matter' is what he would commend to us, and to it he cleaves his way through a number of bitter exaggerations and of partial truths and of unmingled errors. The text is one of a string of paradoxical sayings, some of them very true and beautiful, some of them doubtful, but all of them the kind of things which used-up men are wont to say—the salt which is left in the pool when the tide is gone down. The text is the utterance of a wearied man who has had so many disappointments, and seen so many fair beginnings overclouded, and so many ships going out of port with flying flags and foundering at sea, that he thinks nothing good till it is ended; little worth beginning—rest and freedom from all external cares and duties best; and, best of all, to be dead, and have done with the whole coil. Obviously, 'the end of a thing' here is the parallel to 'the day of death' in verse 1, which is there preferred to 'the day of one's birth.' That is the godless, worn-out worlding's view of the matter, which is infinitely sad, and absolutely untrue.

But from another point of view there is a truth in these words. The life which is lived for God, which is rooted in Christ, a life of self-denial, of love, of purity, of strenuous 'pressing towards the mark, is better in its

'end' than in its 'beginning.' To such a life we are all called, and it is possible for each. May my poor words help some of us to make it ours.

I. Then our life has an end.

It is hard for any of us to realise this in the midst of the rush and pressure of daily duty; and it is not altogether wholesome to think much about it; but it is still more harmful to put it out of our sight, as so many of us do, and to go on habitually as if there would never come a time when we shall cease to be where we have been so long, and when there will no more arise the daily calls to transitory occupations. The thought of the certainty and nearness of that end has often become a stimulus to wild, sensuous living, as the history of the relaxation of morality in pestilences, and in times when war stalked through the land, has abundantly shown. 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die,' is plainly a way of reasoning that appeals to the average man. But the entire forgetfulness that there is an end is no less harmful, and is apt to lead to over-indulgence in sensuous desires as the other extreme. Perhaps the young need more especially to be recalled to the thought of the 'end,' because they are more especially likely to forget it, and because it is specially worth their while to remember it. They have still the long stretch before the 'end' before them, to make of it what they will. Whereas for us who are further on in the course, there is less time and opportunity to shape our path with a view to its close, and to those of us in old age, there is but little need to preach remembrance of what has come so close to us. It is to the young man that the Preacher proffers his final advice, to 'rejoice in his health, and to walk in the ways of his heart, and in the sight of his eyes,' but

withal to know that 'for these God will bring him into judgment.'

And in that counsel is involved the thought that 'the end which is better than the beginning' is neither old age, with its limitations and compulsory abstinences, nor death, which is, as the dreary creed of the book in its central portions believes it to be, the close of all things, but, beyond these, the state in which men will reap as they have sown, and inherit what they have earned. It is that condition which gives all its importance to death—the porter who opens the door into a future life of recompence.

II. The end will, in many respects, not be better than the beginning.

Put side by side the infant and the old man. Think of the undeveloped strength, the smooth cheek, the ruddy complexion, the rejoicing in physical well-being, of the one, with the failing senses, the tottering limbs, the lowered vitality, the many pains and aches, of the other. In these respects the end is worse than the beginning. Or go a step further onwards in life, and think of youth, with its unworn energy, and the wearied longing for rest which comes at the end; of youth, with its quick, open receptiveness for all impressions, and the horny surface of callousness which has overgrown the mind of the old; of youth, with its undeveloped powers and endless possibilities, which in the old have become rigid and fixed; of youth, with the rich gift before it of a continent of time, which in the old has been washed away by the ocean, till there is but a crumbling bank still to stand on; of youth, with its wealth of hopes, and of the hopes of the old, which are solemn ventures, few and scanty—and then say if the end is not worse than the beginning.

And if we go further, and think of death as the end, is it not in a very real and terrible sense, loss, loss? It is loss to be taken out of the world, to 'leave the warm precincts and the cheerful day,' to lose friends and lovers, and to be banned into a dreary land. Yet, further, the thought of the end as being a state of retribution strikes upon all hearts as being solemn and terrible.

III. Yet the end may be better.

The sensuous indulgence which Ecclesiastes preaches in its earlier portions will never lead to such an end. It breeds disgust of life, as the examples of *roués* in all ages, and to-day, abundantly shows. Epicurean selfishness leads to weariness of all effort and work. If we are unwise enough to make either of these our guides in life, the only desirable end will be the utter cessation of being and consciousness.

But there is a better sense in which this paradoxical saying is simple truth, and that sense is one which it is possible for us all to realise. What sort of end would that be, the brightness of which would far outshine the joy when a man-child is born into the world? Would it not be a birth into a better life than that which fills and often disturbs the 'threescore years and ten' here? Would it not be an end to a course in which all our nature would be fully developed and all opportunities of growth and activity had been used to the full? which had secured all that we could possess? which had happy memories and calm hopes? Would it not be an end which brought with it communion with the Highest—joys that could never fade, activities that could never weary? Surely the Christian heaven is better than earth; and that heaven may be ours.

That supreme and perfect end will be reached by us

through faith in Christ, and through union by faith with Him. If we are joined to the Lord and are one with Him, our end in glory will be as much better than this our beginning on earth as the full glory of a summer's day transcends the fogs and frosts of dreary winter. 'The path of the just is as the shining light, which shineth more and more unto the perfect day.'

If the end is not better than the beginning, it will be infinitely worse. Golden opportunities will be gone; wasted years will be irrevocable. Bright lights will be burnt out; sin will be graven on the memory; remorse will be bitter; evil habits which cannot be gratified will torment; a wearied soul, a darkened understanding, a rebellious heart, will make the end awfully, infinitely, always worse than the beginning. From all these Jesus Christ can save us; and, full as He fills the cup of life as we travel along the road, He keeps the best wine till the last, and makes 'the end of a thing better than the beginning.'

MISUSED RESPITE

'Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.'—ECCLES. viii. 11.

WHEN the Pharaoh of the Exodus saw there was respite, he hardened his heart. Abject in his fear before Moses, he was ready to promise anything; insolent in his pride, he swallows down his promises as soon as fear is eased, his repentance and his retraction of it combined to add new weights about his neck. He was but a conspicuous example of a universal fault. Every nation, I suppose, has its proverb scoffing at the contrast between the sick man's vow and the recovered

man's sins. The bitter moralist of the Old Testament was sure not to let such an instance of man's inconceivable levity pass unnoticed. His settled habit of dragging to light the seamy side of human nature was sure to fall on this illustration of it as congenial food. He has wrapped up here in these curt, bitter words a whole theory of man's condition, of God's providence, of its abuse, and of the end to which it all tends.

I. Note the delay in executing sentence.

Every 'evil work' is already sentenced. 'He that believeth not,' said Christ, 'is condemned already'; and that is one case of a general truth. The text writes the sentence as passed, though the execution is for a time suspended. What is the underlying fact expressed by this metaphor? God's thorough knowledge of, and displeasure at, every evil. When one sees vile things done on earth, and no bolt coming out of the clear sky, it is not easy to believe that all the foulness is known to God; but His eye reaches further than He wills to stretch His arm. He sits a silent Onlooker and beholds; the silence does not argue indifference. The sentence is pronounced, but the execution is delayed. It is not wholly delayed, for there are consequences which immediately dog our evil deeds, and are, as it were, premonitions of a yet more complete penalty. But in the present order of things the connection between a man's evil-doing and suffering is, on the whole, slight, obscure, and partial. Evil triumphs; goodness not seldom suffers. If one thinks for a moment of the manifold evils of the world, which swathe it, as it were, in an atmosphere of woe—the wars, the slavery, the oppressions, the private sorrows—and then thinks that there is a God who lets all these go on from generation to generation, we seem to be in the presence

of a mystery of mysteries. The Psalmist of old exclaimed in adoring wonder, 'Thy judgments are a great deep'; but the absence of His judgments seems to open a profounder abyss into which even the great mountains of His righteousness appear in danger of falling.

II. The reasons for this delay.

It is not only a mystery, but it is a 'mystery of love.' We can see but a little way into it, but we can see so far as to be sure that the apparent passivity of God, which looks like leaving evil to work its unhindered will, is the silence of a God who 'doth not willingly afflict,' and is 'slow to anger,' because He is perfect love.

The ground of necessity for the delay in executing the sentence lies, partly, in the probationary character of this present life. If evil-doing was always followed by swift retribution, obedience would be only the obedience of fear, and God does not desire such obedience. It would be impossible that testing could go on at all if at every instant the whole of the consequences of our actions were being realised. Such a condition of things is unthinkable, and would be as confusing, in the moral sphere, as if harvest weather and spring weather were going on together. Again, the great reason why sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily lies in God's own heart, and His desire to win us to Himself by benefits. He does not seek enforced obedience; He neither desires our being wedded to evil, nor our being weighed upon by the consequences of our sin, and so He holds back His hand. It is to be remembered that He not merely does thus restrain the forthcoming of His hand of judgment, but, instead of it, puts forth a hand of blessing. He moves around us wooing us to Himself, and, in patience

possessing His spirit, marks all our sins, but loves and blesses still. He gives us the vineyard, though we do not give Him the fruit. Still He is not angry, but sends His messengers, and we stone them. Still He waits: we go on heaping year upon year of rebellious forgetfulness, and no lightning flashes from His eye, no exclamation of wearied-out patience, comes from His lips, no rush of the sudden arrow from His long-stretched bow. The endless patience of God has no explanation but only this, that He loves us too well to leave any means untried to bring us to Him, and that He lingers round us to win our hearts. O rare and unspeakable love, the patient love of the patient God!

III. The abuse of this delay.

We have the knack of turning God's pure gifts into poison, and practise a devilish chemistry by which we distil venom from the flowers of Eden and the roses of the garden of God. I don't suppose that to many men the respite which marks God's dealing with them actually tends to doubts of His righteousness, or of His power, or of His being. We have evidence enough of these; and the apparently counter evidence, arising from the impunity of evil-doers, is fairly enough laid aside by our moral instincts and consciousness, and by the consideration that the mighty sweep of God's providence is too great for us to decide on the whole circle by the small portion of the circumference which we have seen. But what most men do is simply that they permit impunity to deaden their sense of right and wrong, and go on in their course without any serious thought of God's blessings, to jostle Him out of their mind; they '*despise* the riches of His long-suffering goodness,' and never suffer it to 'lead them to repentance.' To the unthinking minds of most of us,

the long continuance of impunity lulls us into a dream of its perpetuity. Man's godless ingratitude is as deep a mystery as is God's loving patience. It is strange that, with such constant failure of His love to win, God should still persevere in it. For more than seventy times seven He persists in forgiving the rebellious child who sins against Him, and for more than seventy times seven the child persists in the abuse of the Father's love, which still remains—an abuse of sin above all sins.

IV. The end of the delay.

The sentence is passed. It is impossible that it should not be executed. When God has done all, and sees that the point of hopelessness is reached, or when the time has for other reasons come, then He lets the sentence take effect. He kept back the destroying angels from Sodom, but He sent them forth at last. There is a point in the history of nations and of men when iniquity is 'full,' and when God sees that it is best, on world-wide grounds or personal ones, to end it. So there come for nations and for individuals crises; and the law for the divine working is, 'A short work will the Lord make on the earth.' For long years Noah was building the ark, and exposed to the scoffs of a generation whose sentence had been pronounced and not yet executed; but the day came when he entered into its covert, and 'the flood came and destroyed them all.' For generations He would fain have gathered the people of Jerusalem to His bosom 'as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and they would not'; but the day came when the Roman soldiers cast their torches into the beautiful house where their fathers had praised Him, and sinned against Him, and it was left unto them desolate. Let us not be high-minded nor victims of our levity and inconsiderateness, but fear.

Let us remember too that the intensity of the execution is aggravated by all the sins committed during the delay. By them we 'treasure wrath against the day of wrath.' He says to His angels at last 'Now,' and the sword falls, and justice is done. 'The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceeding small.' The sum of the whole matter is, every evil of ours is sentenced already; the punishment is delayed for our sins, and because Christ has died. God is wooing our hearts, and trying to win us to love Him by the holding back of the sentence which we are daily abusing. Shall we not accept His forbearance and take His gifts as tokens of the patient tenderness of His heart? Or are we to be like 'the brutes that perish,' knowing neither the hand that feeds them, nor the hand that kills them. The delay in rendering 'the just recompence of reward' only aggravates its weight when it falls. As in some levers, the slower the motion, the greater the force of the lift.

FENCES AND SERPENTS

' . . . Whoso breaketh an hedge, a serpent shall bite him.'—ECCLES. X. 8.

WHAT is meant here is, probably, not such a hedge as we are accustomed to see, but a dry-stone wall, or, perhaps, an earthen embankment, in the crevices of which might lurk a snake to sting the careless hand. The connection and purpose of the text are somewhat obscure. It is one of a string of proverb-like sayings which all seem to be illustrations of the one thought that every kind of work has its own appropriate and peculiar peril. So, says the Preacher, if a man is digging a pit, the sides of it may cave in and he may go

down. If he is pulling down a wall he may get stung. If he is working in a quarry there may be a fall of rock. If he is a woodman the tree he is felling may crush him. What then? Is the inference to be, Sit still and do nothing, because you may get hurt whatever you do? By no means. The writer of this book hates idleness very nearly as much as he does what he calls 'folly,' and his inference is stated in the next verse—'Wisdom is profitable to direct.' That is to say since all work has its own dangers, work warily, and with your brains as well as your muscles, and do not put your hand into the hollow in the wall, until you have looked to see whether there are any snakes in it. Is that very wholesome maxim of prudence all that is meant to be learned? I think not. The previous clause, at all events, embodies a well-known metaphor of the Old Testament. 'He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it,' often occurs as expressing the retribution in kind that comes down on the cunning plotter against other men's prosperity, and the conclusion that wisdom suggests in that application of the sentence is, *not* 'Dig judiciously,' but 'Do not dig at all.' And so in my text the 'wall' may stand for the limitations and boundary-lines of our lives, and the inference that wisdom suggests in that application of the saying is not 'Pull down judiciously,' but 'Keep the fence up, and be sure you keep on the right side of it.' For any attempt to pull it down—which being interpreted is, to transgress the laws of life which God has enjoined—is sure to bring out the hissing snake with its poison.

Now it is in that aspect that I want to look at the words before us.

I. First of all, let us take that thought which underlies my text—that all life is given us rigidly walled up.

The first thing that the child learns is, that it must not do what it likes. The last lesson that the old man has to learn is, you must do what you ought. And between these two extremes of life we are always making attempts to treat the world as an open common, on which we may wander at our will. And before we have gone many steps, some sort of keeper or other meets us and says to us, 'Trespassers, back again to the road!' Life is rigidly hedged in and limited. To live as you like is the prerogative of a brute. To live as you ought, and to recognise and command by obeying the laws and limitations stamped upon our very nature and enjoined by our circumstances, is the freedom and the glory of a man. There are limitations, I say—fences on all sides. Men put up their fences; and they are often like the wretched wooden hoardings that you sometimes see limiting the breadth of a road. But in regard to these conventional limitations and regulations, which own no higher authority or law-giver than society and custom, you must make up your mind even more certainly than in regard of loftier laws, that if you meddle with them, there will be plenty of serpents coming out to hiss and bite. No man that defies the narrow maxims and petty restrictions of conventional ways, and sets at nought the opinions of the people round about him, but must make up his mind for backbiting and slander and opposition of all sorts. It is the price that we pay for obeying at first hand the laws of God and caring nothing for the conventionalities of men.

But apart from that altogether, let me just remind you, in half a dozen sentences, of the various limitations or fences which hedge up our lives on every side. There are the obligations which we owe, and the rela-

tions in which we stand, to the outer world, the laws of physical life, and all that touches the external and the material. There are the relations in which we stand, and the obligations which we owe, to ourselves. And God has so made us as that obviously large tracts of every man's nature are given to him on purpose to be restrained, curbed, coerced, and sometimes utterly crushed and extirpated. God gives us our impulses under lock and key. All our animal desires, all our natural tendencies, are held on condition that we exercise control over them, and keep them well within the rigidly marked limits which He has laid down, and which we can easily find out. There are, further, the relations in which we stand, and the obligations and limitations, therefore, under which we come, to the people round about us. High above them all, and in some sense including them all, but loftier than these, there is the all-comprehending relation in which we stand to God, who is the fountain of all obligations, the source and aim of all duty, who encompasses us on every side, and whose will makes the boundary walls within which alone it is safe for a man to live.

We sometimes foolishly feel that a life thus hedged up, limited by these high boundaries on either side, must be uninteresting, monotonous, or unfree. It is not so. The walls are blessings, like the parapet on a mountain road, that keeps the travellers from toppling over the face of the cliff. They are training-walls, as our hydrographical engineers talk about, which, built in the bed of a river, wholesomely confine its waters and make a good scour which gives life, instead of letting them vaguely wander and stagnate across great fields of mud. Freedom consists in keeping willingly within the limits which God has traced, and anything else is

not freedom but licence and rebellion, and at bottom servitude of the most abject type.

II. So, secondly, note that every attempt to break down the limitations brings poison into the life.

We live in a great automatic system which, by its own operation, largely avenges every breach of law. I need not remind you, except in a word, of the way in which the transgression of the plain physical laws stamped upon our constitutions avenges itself; but the certainty with which disease dogs all breaches of the laws of health is but a type in the lower and material universe of the far higher and more solemn certainty with which 'the soul that sinneth, it shall die.' Wherever a man sets himself against any of the laws of this material universe, they make short work of him. We command them, as I said, by obeying them; and the difference between the obedience and the breach of them is the difference between the engineer standing on his engine and the wretch that is caught by it as it rushes over the rails. But that is but a parable of the higher thing which I want to speak to you about.

The grosser forms of transgression of the plain laws of temperance, abstinence, purity, bring with them, in like manner, a visible and palpable punishment in the majority of cases. Whoso pulls down the wall of temperance, a serpent will bite him. Trembling hands, broken constitutions, ruined reputations, vanished ambitions, wasted lives, poverty, shame, and enfeebled will, death—these are the serpents that bite, in many cases, the transgressor. I have a man in my eye at this moment that used to sit in one of these pews, who came into Manchester a promising young man, a child of many prayers, with the ball at his foot, in one of your great warehouses, the only hope of his house,

professedly a Christian. He began to tamper with the wall. First a tiny little bit of stone taken out that did not show the daylight through; then a little bigger, and a bigger. And the serpent struck its fangs into him, and if you saw him now, he is a shambling wreck, outside of society, and, as we sometimes tremblingly think, beyond hope. Young men! 'whoso breaketh an hedge, a serpent shall bite him.'

In like manner there are other forms of 'sins of the flesh avenged in kind,' which I dare not speak about more plainly here. I see many young men in my congregation, many strangers in this great city, living, I suppose, in lodgings, and therefore without many restraints. If you were to take a pair of compasses and place one leg of them down at the Free Trade Hall, and take a circle of half a mile round there, you would get a cavern of rattlesnakes. You know what I mean. Low theatres, low music-halls, casinos, haunts of yet viler sorts—there the snakes are, hissing and writhing and ready to bite. Do not 'put your hand on the hole of the asp.' Take care of books, pictures, songs, companions that would lead you astray. Oh for a voice to stand at some doors that I know in Manchester, and peal this text into the ears of the fools, men and women, that go in there!

I heard only this week of one once in a good position in this city, and in early days, I believe, a member of my own congregation, begging in rags from door to door. And the reason was, simply, the wall had been pulled down and the serpent had struck. It always does; not with such fatal external effects always, but be ye sure of this, 'God is not mocked; "whatsoever a man," or a woman either, "soweth, that shall he also reap."' For remember that there are other ways of

pulling down walls than these gross and palpable transgressions with the body; and there are other sorts of retributions which come with unerring certainty besides those that can be taken notice of by others. I do not want to dwell upon these at any length, but let me just remind you of one or two of them.

Some serpents' bites inflame, some paralyse; and one or other of these two things—either an inflamed conscience or a palsied conscience—is the result of all wrongdoing. I do not know which is the worst. There are men and women now in this chapel, sitting listening to me, perhaps half interested, without the smallest suspicion that I am talking about them. The serpent's bite has led to the torpor of their consciences. Which is the worse—to loathe my sin and yet to find its slimy coils round about me, so that I cannot break it, or to have got to like it and to be perfectly comfortable in it, and to have no remonstrance within when I do it? Be sure of this, that every transgression and disobedience acts immediately upon the conscience of the doer, sometimes to stir that conscience into agonies of gnawing remorse, more often to lull it into a fatal slumber.

I do not speak of the retributions which we heap upon ourselves in loading our memories with errors and faults, in polluting them often with vile imaginations, or in laying up there a lifelong series of actions, none of which have ever had a trace of reference to God in them. I do not speak, except in a sentence, of the retribution which comes from the habit of evil which weighs upon men, and makes it all but impossible for them ever to shake off their sin. I do not speak, except in a sentence, of the perverted relations to God, the incapacity of knowing Him, the disregard, and even

sometimes the dislike, of the thought of Him which steal across the heart of the man that lives in evil and sin; but I put all into two words—every sin that I do tells upon myself, inasmuch as its virus passes into my blood as *guilt* and as *habit*. And then I remind you of what you say you believe, that beyond this world there lies the solemn judgment-seat of God, where you and I have to give account of our deeds. O brother, be sure of this, ‘whoso breaketh an hedge’—here and now, and yonder also—‘a serpent shall bite him’!

That is as far as my text carries me. It has nothing more to say. Am I to shut the book and have done? There is only one system that has anything more to say, and that is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

III. And so, passing from my text, I have to say, lastly, All the poison may be got out of your veins if you like.

Our Lord used this very same metaphor under a different aspect, and with a different historical application, when He said, ‘As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.’

There is Christ’s idea of the condition of this world of ours—a camp of men lying bitten by serpents and drawing near to death. What I have been speaking about, in perhaps too abstract terms, is the condition of each one of us. It is hard to get people, when they are gathered by the hundred to listen to a sermon flung out in generalities, to realise it. If I could get you one by one, and ‘buttonhole’ you; and instead of the plural ‘you’ use the singular ‘thou,’ perhaps I could reach you. But let me ask you to try and realise each for himself that this serpent bite, as the issue of pulling

down the wall, is true about each soul in this place, and that Christ endorsed the representation. How are we to get this poison out of the blood? Reform your ways? Yes; I say that too; but reforming the life will deliver from the poison in the character, when you cure hydrophobia by washing the patient's skin, and not till then. It is all very well to repaper your dining-rooms, but it is very little good doing that if the drainage is wrong. It is the drainage that is wrong with us all. A man cannot reform himself down to the bottom of his sinful being. If he could, it does not touch the past. That remains the same. If he could, it does not affect his relation to God. Repentance—if it were possible apart from the softening influence of faith in Jesus Christ—repentance alone would not solve the problem. So far as men can see, and so far as all human systems have declared, 'What I have written I have written.' There is no erasing it. The irrevocable past stands stereotyped for ever. Then comes in this message of forgiveness and cleansing, which is the very heart of all that we preachers have to say, and has been spoken to most of you so often that it is almost impossible to invest it with any kind of freshness or power. But once more I have to preach to you that Christ has received into His own inmost life and self the whole gathered consequences of a world's sin; and by the mystery of His sympathy, and the reality of His mysterious union with us men, He, the sinless Son of God, has been made sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. The brazen serpent lifted on the pole was in the likeness of the serpent whose poison slew, but there was no poison in it. Christ has come, the sinless Son of God, for you and me. He has died on the Cross, the

Sacrifice for every man's sin, that every man's wound might be healed, and the poison cast out of his veins. He has bruised the malignant, black head of the snake with His wounded heel; and because He has been wounded, we are healed of our wounds. For sin and death launched their last dart at Him, and, like some venomous insect that can sting once and then must die, they left their sting in His wounded heart, and have none for them that put their trust in Him.

So, dear brother, here is the simple condition—namely, faith. One look of the languid eye of the poisoned man, howsoever bloodshot and dim it might be, and howsoever nearly veiled with the film of death, was enough to make him whole. The look of our consciously sinful souls to that dear Christ that has died for us will take away the guilt, the power, the habit, the love of evil; and, instead of blood saturated with the venom of sin, there will be in our veins the Spirit of life in Christ, which will 'make us free from the law of sin and death.' 'Look unto Him and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth!'

THE WAY TO THE CITY

'The labour of the foolish wearieth every one of them, because he knoweth not how to go to the city.'—ECCLES. x. 15.

ON the surface this seems to be merely a piece of homely, practical sagacity, conjoined with one of the bitter things which Ecclesiastes is fond of saying about those whom he calls 'fools.' It seems to repeat, under another metaphor, the same idea which has been presented in a previous verse, where we read: 'If the iron be blunt, and he do not whet the edge, then must he put to more strength; but wisdom is profitable to

direct.' That is to say, skill is better than strength; brain saves muscle; better sharpen your axe than put yourself into a perspiration, hitting fierce blows with a blunt one. The prerogative of wisdom is to guide brute force. And so in my text the same general idea comes under another figure. Immense effort may end in nothing but tired feet if the traveller does not know his road. A man lost in the woods may run till he drops, and find himself at night in the place from which he started in the morning. The path must be known, and the aim clear, if any good is to come of effort.

That phrase, 'how to go to the city,' seems to be a kind of proverbial comparison for anything that is very plain and conspicuous, just as our forefathers used to say about any obvious truth, that it was 'as plain as the road to London town.' The road to the capital is sure to be a well-marked one, and he must be a fool indeed who cannot see that. So our text, though on the surface, as I say, is simply a sarcasm and a piece of homely, practical sagacity, yet, like almost all the sayings in this Book of Ecclesiastes, it has a deeper meaning than appears on the surface; and may be applied in higher and more important directions. It carries with it large truths, and enshrines in a vivid metaphor bitter experiences which, I suppose, we can all confirm.

I. We consider, first, the toil that tires.

'The labour wearies every one of them.' The word translated 'labour' seems to carry with it both the idea of effort and of trouble. Or to recur to a familiar distinction in modern English, the word really covers both the ground of work and of worry. And it is a sad and solemn thought that a word with that double

element in it should be the one which is most truly applicable to the efforts of a large majority of men. I suppose there never was a time in the world's history when life went so fast as it does in these great centres of civilisation and commerce in which you and I live. And it is awful to have to think that the great mass of it all ends in nothing else but tired limbs and exhaustion. That is a truth to be verified by experience, and I am bold to believe that every man and woman in this chapel now can say more or less distinctly 'Amen!' to the assertion that every life, except a distinctly and supremely religious one, is worry and work without adequate satisfying result, and with no lasting issue but exhaustion.

Let us begin at the bottom. For instance, take a man who has avowedly flung aside the restraints of right and wrong and conscience, and does things habitually that he knows to be wrong. Every sin is a blunder as well as a crime. No man who aims at an end through the smoke of hell gets the end that he aims at. Or if he does, he gets something that takes all the gilt off the gingerbread, and all the sweetness out of the success. They put a very evil-tasting ingredient into spirits of wine to prevent its being drunk. The cup that sin reaches to a man, though the wine moveth itself aright and is very pleasant to look at before being tasted, cheats with *methyiated* spirits. Men and women take more pains and trouble to damn themselves than ever they do to have their souls saved. The end of all work, which begins with tossing conscience on one side, is simply this—'The labour of the foolish wearieth every one of them.'

Take a step higher—a respectable, well-to-do Manchester man, successful in business. He has made it

his aim to build up a large concern, and has succeeded. He has a fine house, carriages, greenhouses; he has 'J.P.' to his name; he stands high in credit and on 'Change. His name is one that gives respectability to anything that it is connected with. Has he 'come to the city'? Has he got what he thought he would get when he began his career? He has succeeded in his immediate and smaller purpose; has that immediate and smaller purpose succeeded in bringing him what he thought it would bring him? Or has he fallen a victim to those—

'juggling fiends . . .

That palter with us in a double sense;

That keep the word of promise to the ear,

And break it to the hope?'

They tell us that if you put down in one column the value of the ore that has been extracted from all the Australian gold-mines, and in another the amount that it has cost to get it, the latter sum will exceed the former. There are plenty of people in Manchester who have put more down into the pit from which they dig their wealth than ever they will get out of it. And their labour, too, leaves a very dark and empty aching centre in their lives, 'and wearieth every one of them.'

And so I might go the whole round. We students, so long as our pursuit of knowledge has not in it as supreme, directing motive, and ultimate aim and issue, the glory and the service of God, come under the lash of the same condemnation as those grosser and lower forms of life of which I have been speaking. But wherever we look, if there be not in the heart and in the life a supreme regard to God and a communion with Him, then this characteristic is common to all the courses, that, whilst they may each meet some imme-

diate and partial necessity of our natures, none of them is adequate for the whole circumference of a man's being, nor any of them able, during the whole duration of that being, to be his satisfaction and his rest. Therefore, I say, all toil, however successful to the view of a shorter range of vision, and however noble—excluding the noblest of all—all toil that ends only in securing that which perishes with the using, or that which we leave behind us here when we pass hence, is condemned for folly and labour that wearies the men who are fools enough to surrender themselves to it.

I need not remind you of the wonderful variety of metaphor under which that threadbare thought, which yet it is so hard for us to believe and make operative in our lives, is represented to us in Scripture. Just let me recall one or two of them in the briefest way. 'Why do ye spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which profiteth not?' 'They have hewn for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water.' 'Their webs shall not become garments.' That may want a word of explanation. The metaphor is this. You are all like spiders spinning carefully and diligently your web. There is not substance enough in it to make a coat out of. You will never cover yourselves with the product of your own brains or your own efforts. There is no clothing in the spider's webs of a godless life.

Ah! brother, all these earthly aims which some of my friends listening to me now have for the *sole* aims of their lives, are as foolish and as inadequate to accomplish that which is sought for by them, as it would be to seek to quench raging thirst by lifting to the lips a golden cup that is empty. Some of us have

a whole sideboard full of such, and vary our pursuits according to inclination and task. Some of us have only one such, but they are all empty, and the lip is parched after the cup has been lifted to it as it was before.

II. And so, consider now, secondly, the foolish ignorance that makes the toil tiresome.

The metaphor of my text says that the reason why the 'fool' is so wearied after the day's march is that he does not in the morning settle where he is going, and how he is to get there; and so, having started to go nowhither, he has got where he started for. He 'does not know how to go to the city'—which, being translated into plain and unmetaphorical English, is just this, that many men wreck their lives for want of a clear sight of their true aim, and of the way to secure it.

There is nothing more tragical than the absence, in the great bulk of men, of anything like deliberate, definite views as to their aim in life, and the course to be taken to secure it. There are two things obviously necessary for success in any enterprise. One is, that there shall be the most definite and clear conception of what is aimed at; and the other, that there shall be a wisely considered plan to get at it. Unless there be these, if you go at random, running a little way for a moment in this direction, and then heading about and going in the other, you cannot expect to get to the goal.

Now, what I want to ask some of my friends here is, Did you ever give ten deliberate minutes to try to face for yourselves, and put into plain words, what you are living for, and how you mean to secure it? Of course I know that you have given thought

and planning in plenty to the nearer aims, without which material life cannot be lived at all. I do not suppose that anybody here is chargeable with not having thought enough about how to get on in business, or in their chosen walk of life. It is not that kind of aim which I mean at all; but it is a point beyond it that I want to press upon you. You are like men who would carefully victual a ship and take the best information for their guide as to what course to lie, and had never thought what they were going to do when they got to the port. So you say, 'I am going to be such-and-such a thing.' Well, what then? 'Well, I am going to lay myself out for success.' Be it commercial, be it intellectual, be it social, be it in the sphere of the affections, or whatever it may be. Well, what then? 'Well, then I am going to advance in material prosperity, I hope, or in wisdom, or to be surrounded by loving faces of children and those that are dear to me.' What then? 'Then I am going to die.' What then?

It is not till you get to that last question, and have faced it and answered it, that you can be said to have taken the whole sweep of the circumstances into view, and regulated your course according to the dictates of common sense and right reason. And a terribly large number of us live with careful adaptation of means to ends in regard of all the smaller and more immediately to be realised aims of life, but have never faced the larger question which reduces all these smaller aims to insignificance. The simple child's interrogation which in the well-known ballad ripped the tinsel off the skeleton, and showed war in its hideousness, strips many of your lives of all pretence to be reasonable. 'What good came of it at the last?'

Can you answer the question that the infant lips asked, and say, 'This good will come of it at last. That I shall have God for my own, and Jesus Christ in my heart'?

Brother! if I could only get you to this point, that you would take half an hour now to think over what you ought to be, and to ask yourself whether your aims in life correspond to what your aims should be, I should have done more than I am afraid I shall do with some of you. The naturalist can tell when he picks up a skeleton something of the habits and the element of the creature to which it belonged. If it has a hollow *sternum* he knows it is meant to fly. On your nature is impressed unmistakably that your destiny is not to creep, but to soar. Not in vain does the Westminster Catechism lay the foundation of everything in this, the prime question for all men, 'What is the chief end of man?' Ask that, and do not rest till you have answered it.

Then there is another idea connected with this ignorance of my text—viz. that it is the result of folly. Now the words 'folly' and 'foolish' and 'foolishness,' and their opposites, 'wisdom' and 'wise,' in this Book of Ecclesiastes, as in the Book of Proverbs, do not mean merely dull stupidity intellectually, which is a thing for which a man is to be pitied rather than to be blamed, but they always carry besides the idea of intellectual defect, also the idea of moral obliquity. 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'; and, conversely, the absence of that fear is the foundation of that which this writer stigmatises as 'folly'. He is not merely sneering at men with small brains and little judgments. There may be plenty of us who are so, and yet are wise unto salvation and possessed

of a far higher wisdom than that of this world. But he tells us that so strangely intertwined are the intellectual and moral parts of our nature, that wheresoever there is the obscuration of the latter there is sure to be the perversion of the former, and the man knows not 'how to go to the city' because he is 'foolish.'

That is to say, you go wrong in your judgment about your conduct because you have gone wrong morally. And your blunders about life, and your ignorance of its true end and aim, and your mistakes as to how to secure happiness and blessedness, are your own faults, and are owing to the aversion of your nature from that which is highest and noblest, even God and His service. Therefore you are not only to be pitied because you are out of the road, but to be blamed because you have darkened the eyes of your mind by loving the darkness rather than the light. And you 'do not know how to go to the city,' because you do not want to go to the city, and would rather huddle here in the wilderness, and live upon its poor supplies, than pass within the golden gates. My brethren! the folly which blinds a man to his true aim and mission in life is a folly which has in it the darker aspect of sin, and is punishable as such.

III. Lastly, note the plain path which the foolish miss.

He 'does not know how to go to the city.' What on earth will he be able to see if he cannot see that broad highway, beaten and white, stretching straight before him, over hill and dale, and going right to the gates? A man must be a fool who cannot find the way to London.

The principles of moral conduct are trite and obvious. It is plain that it is better to be good than

bad. It is better to be unselfish than selfish. It is better not to live for things that perish, seeing that we are going to last for ever. It is better not to make the flesh our master here, seeing that the spirit will have to live without the flesh some day. It is better to get into training for the world to come, seeing that we are all drifting thither. All these things are plain and obvious.

Man's destiny for God is unmistakable. 'Whose image and superscription hath it?' said Christ about the coin. 'Cæsar's!' 'Then give it to Cæsar.' Whose image and superscription hath my heart, this restless heart of mine, this spirit that wanders on through space and time, homeless and comfortless, until it can grasp the Eternal? Who are you meant for? God! And every fibre of your nature has a voice to say so to you if you listen to it. So, then, a godless life such as some of you, my hearers, are contentedly living, ignores facts that are most patent to every man's experience. And while before you, huge 'as a mountain, open, palpable,' are the commonplaces and undeniable verities which declare that every man who is not a God-fearing man is a fool, you admit them all, and, bowing your heads in reverence, let them all go over you and produce no effect.

The road is clearer than ever since Jesus Christ came. He has shown us the city, for He has brought life and immortality to light by the Gospel. He has shown us the road, for His life is the pattern of all that men ought to aim at and to be. The motto of the eternal Son of God, if I may venture upon such a metaphor, is like the motto of the heir-apparent of the English throne, 'I serve.' 'Lo! I come to do Thy will'—and that is the only word which will make a human

life peaceful and strong and beautiful. In the presence of His radiant and solitary perfection, men no longer need to wonder, What is the ideal to which conduct and character should be conformed? And Jesus Christ has come to make it possible to go to the city, by that cross on which He bore the burden of all sin, and takes away the sin of the world, and by that Spirit of life which He will impart to our weakness, and which makes our sluggish feet run in the way of His commandments, and not be weary, and walk and not faint.

Take that dear Lord for your revelation of duty, for your Pattern of conduct, for the forgiveness of your sins, for the Inspirer with power to do His will, and then you will see stretching before you, high up above the surrounding desert, so that no lion nor ravenous beast shall go up there, the highway on which the ransomed of the Lord shall walk, 'and the wayfaring man, though a fool, shall not err therein.' 'Blessed are they that wash their robes, that they may enter in through the gates into the City.'

A NEW YEAR'S SERMON TO THE YOUNG

'Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth, and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment. . . . Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them.'—**ECCLES. xi. 9; xii. 1.**

THIS strange, and in some places perplexing Book of Ecclesiastes, is intended to be the picture of a man fighting his way through perplexities and half-truths to a clear conviction in which he can rest. What he says in his process of coming to that conviction is not always

to be taken as true. Much that is spoken in the earlier portion of the Book is spoken in order to be confuted, and its insufficiency, its exaggerations, its onesidedness, and its half-truths, to be manifest in the light of the ultimate conclusion to which he comes. Through all these perplexities he goes on 'sounding his dim and perilous way,' with pitfalls on this side of him and bogs on that, till he comes out at last upon the open way, with firm ground under foot and a clear sky overhead. These phrases which I have taken are the opening sentences and the final conclusion on which he rests. How then are they meant to be understood? Is that saying, 'Rejoice, O young man! in the days of thy youth, and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart and in the sight of thine eyes,' to be taken as a bit of fierce irony? Is this a man taking the maxims of the foolish world about him and seeming to approve of them in order that he may face round at the end with a quick turn and a cynical face and hand them back their maxims along with that which will shatter them to pieces—as if he said, 'Oh, yes! go on, talk your fill about making the best of this world, and rejoicing and doing as you like, dancing on the edge of a precipice, and fiddling, like Nero, whilst a worse fire than that of Rome is burning'? Well, I do not think that is the meaning of it. Though there is irony to be found in the Bible, I do not think that fierce irony like that which might do for the like of Dean Swift, is the intention of the Preacher. So I take these words to be said in good faith, as a frank recognition of the fact that, after all we have been hearing about vanity and vexation of spirit, life is worth living for, and that God means young people to be glad and to make the best of the fleeting years

that will never come back with the same buoyancy and elasticity all their lives long. And then I take it that the words added are not meant to destroy or neutralise the concession of the first sentence, but only to purify and ennoble a gladness which, without them, would be apt to be stained by many a corruption, and to make permanent a joy which, without them, would be sure to die down into the miserable, peevish, and feeble old age of which the grim picture follows, and to be quenched at last in death. So there are three words that I take out of this text of mine, and that I want to bring before my young friends as exhortations which it is wise to follow. These are Rejoice, Reflect, Remember. Rejoice—the fitting gladness of youth; reflect—the solemn thought that will guard the gladness from stain; remember—the religion which will make these things ever last.

First of all 'Rejoice.' Do as you like, for that is the English translation of the words, 'Walk in the ways of thine heart and in the sight of thine eyes.' Buoyantly and cheerfully follow the inclinations and the desires which are stamped upon your nature and belong to your time of life. All young things are joyful, from the lamb in the pastures upwards, and are meant to be so. The mere bounding sense of physical strength which leads so many of you young men astray is a good thing and a blessed thing—a blessing to be thankful for and to cherish. Your smooth cheeks, so unlike those of old age, are only an emblem of the comparative freedom from care which belongs to your happy condition. Your memories are not yet like some—a book written within and without with the records of mourning and disappointment and crosses. There are in all probability long years stretching

before you, instead of a narrow strip of barren sand, before you come to the great salt sea that is going to swallow you up, as is the case with some of us. Christianity looks with complacency on your gladness, and does not mean to clip the wing of one white-winged pleasure, or to breathe one glimmer of blackness on your atmosphere. You are meant to be glad, but it is gladness in a far higher sense that I want to secure for you, or rather to make you secure for yourselves. God delights in the prosperity and light-hearted buoyancy of His children, especially of His young children. Ah! but I know there are young lives over which poverty or ill-health or sorrows of one kind or another have cast a gloom as incongruous to your time of life as snow in the garden in the spring, that pinches the crocuses and weighs down young green beech-leaves, would be. And if I am speaking to any young man or young woman at this time who by reason of painful outward circumstances has had but a chilling spring and youth, I would say to them, 'don't lose heart'; a cloudy morning often breaks into a perfect day. It is good for a man to have to 'bear the yoke in his youth,' and if you miss joy, you may get grace and strength and patience, which will be a blessing to you all your days. For all that, the ordinary course of things is that the young should be glad, and that the young life should be as the rippling brook in the sunshine. I want to leave upon your minds this impression, that it is all right and all in the order of God's providence, who means every one of you to rejoice in the days of your youth. The text says further, 'Walk in the ways of thine heart.' That sounds very like the unwholesome teaching, 'Follow nature; do as you like; let passions and tastes and inclinations be your guides.

Well, that needs to be set round with a good many guards to prevent it becoming a doctrine of devils. But for all that, I wish you to notice that that has a great and a religious side to it. You have come into possession of this mystical life of yours, a possession which requires that you must choose what kind of life you will follow. Every one has this awful prerogative of being able to walk in the way of their heart. You have to answer for the kind of way that is, and the kind of heart out of which it has come. But I want to go to more important things, and so with a clear understanding that the joy of youth is all right and legitimate, that you are intended to be glad, and to feel the physical and intellectual spring and buoyancy of early days, let us go on to the next thing. 'Rejoice,' says my text, and it adds, 'Reflect.' It is one of the blessings of your time of life, my young friends, that you do not do much of that. It is one of your happy immunities that you are not yet in the habit of looking at life as a whole, and considering actions and consequences. Keep that spontaneity as long as you can; it is a good thing to keep. But for all that, do not forget this awful thing, that it may turn to exaggeration and excess, and that it needs, like all other good things, to be guarded and rightly used. And so, 'Rejoice,' and 'walk in the sight of thine eyes'; but—'know that for all these things God will bring thee to judgment.' Well, now, is that thought to come in (I was going to say, like a mourning-coach driven through a wedding procession) to kill the joys we have been seeming to receive from the former words? Are we taking back all that we have been giving, and giving out instead something that will make them all cower and be quiet, like the singing birds that stop

their singing and hide in the leaves when they see the kite in the sky? No, there is no need for anything of the sort. 'For all these things God will bring thee to judgment': that is not the thought that kills, but that purifies and ennobles. Regard being had to the opinions expressed at various points in the earlier portion of this Book, we may be allowed to think of this testimony as having reference to the perpetual judgment that is going on in this world always over every man's life. A great German thinker has it, in reference to the history of nations, that the history of the world is the judgment of the world, and although that is not true if it is a denial of a physical day of judgment, it is true in a very profound and solemn sense with regard to the daily life of every man, that whether there be a judgment-seat beyond the grave or not, and whether this Preacher knew anything about that or no, there is going on through the whole of a man's life, and evolving itself, this solemn conviction, that we are to pass away from this present life. All our days are knit together as one whole. Yesterday is the parent of to-day, and to-day is the parent of all the to-morrows. The meaning and the deepest consequence of man's life is that no feeling, no thought that flits across the mirror of his life and heart dies utterly, leaving nothing behind it. But rather the metaphor of the Apostle is the true one, 'That which thou sowest, that shalt thou also reap.' All your life a seed-time, all your life a harvest-time too, for the seed which I sow to-day is the seed which I have reaped from all my former sowings, and so cause and consequence go rolling on in life in extricable entanglement, issuing out in this, that whatever a man does lives on in him, and that each moment inherits the

whole consequence of his former life. And now, you young men and women, you boys and girls, mind! this seed-time is the one that will be most powerful in your lives, and there is a judgment you do not need to die to meet. If you are idle at school, you will never learn Latin when you go to business. If you are frivolous in your youth, if you stain your souls and soil your lives by outward coarse sin here in Manchester in your young days, there will be a taint about you all your lives. You cannot get rid of that brave law that 'Whatever a man sows, that, thirtyfold, sixtyfold, an hundredfold, that shall he also reap'—the same kind, but infinitely multiplied in quantity. Let me therefore name some of the ways in which your joys or pleasures, as lads, as boys and girls, as growing young men and women, will bring you to judgment. Health, that is one; position, that is two; reputation, that is three; character, that is four. Did you ever see them build one of those houses they make in some parts of the country, with concrete instead of stones? Take a spadeful of the mud, and put it into a frame on the wall. When it is dry, take away the frame and the supports, and it hardens into rock. You take your single deeds—the mud sometimes, young men!—pop them on the wall, and think no more about it. Ay, but they stop there and harden there, and lo! a character—a house for your soul to live in—health, position, memory, capacity, and all that. If you have not done certain things which you ought to have done, you will never be able to do them, and there are the materials for a judgment. That is going on every moment, and especially is it going on in the region of your pleasures. If they are unworthy, you are unworthy; if they are gross, and coarse, and low, and animal, they are drag-

ging you down ; if they are frivolous and foolish, they are making you a poor butterfly of a creature that is worth nothing and will be of no good to anybody ; if they are pure, and chaste, and lofty, and virginal and white, they will make your souls good and gracious and tender with the tenderness and beauty of God.

But that is not all. I am not going to travel beyond the limits of this present life with any words of mine, but as I read this final conclusion in this Book of Ecclesiastes, I think I can perceive that the doubts and the scepticisms about a future life, and the difference between a man and a beast which are spoken of in the earlier chapters, have all been overcome, and the clear conviction of the writer is expressed in these twofold great sayings : 'The spirit shall return unto God who gave it, and the words with which He stamps all His message upon our hearts, the final words of His book' ; 'God shall bring every work into judgment with every secret thing.' And I come to you and say, 'I suppose you believe in a state of retribution beyond ?' I suppose that most of the young folk I am speaking to now at all events believe that 'Thou wilt come to be our judge,' as the *Te Deum* has it ; and that it is this same personal self of mine that is to stand there who is sitting here ? God shall bring *thee* into judgment. Never mind what is to come of the body, the quivering, palpitating, personal centre. The very same self that I know myself to be will be carried there. Now, take that with you and lay it to heart, and let it have a bearing on your pleasure. It will kill nothing that deserves to live, it will take no real joy out of a man's life. It will only strain out the poison that would kill you. You turn that thought upon your heart, my friends. Is it like a policeman's bull's-

eye turned upon a lot of bad characters hiding under a railway arch in the corner there? If so, the sooner you get rid of the pleasures and inclinations that slink away when that beam of light strikes their ugly faces, the better for yourselves and for your lives. 'Rejoice in the way of thine heart and, that thy joy may be pure, know that for all this God will bring thee into judgment.'

And now my last word, 'Remember God,' says my text. The former two sayings, if taken by themselves, would make a very imperfect guide to life. Self-indulgence regulated by the thought of retribution is a very low kind of life after all. There is something better in this world, and that is work; something higher, and that is duty; something nobler than self-indulgence, and that is self-sacrifice. And so no religion worthy the name contents itself by saying to a man, 'Be good and you will be glad'; but, 'Never mind whether you are glad; be good at any rate, and such gladness as is good for you will come to you, and you can want the rest.' 'Remember thy Creator in the days of thy youth.' Recall God to your thoughts, and keep Him in your mind all the day long. That is wonderfully unlike your life, is it not? Remember thy Creator; shift the centre of your life. What I have been saying might be true of a man, the centre of whose life was himself, and such a man is next door to a devil, for, I suppose, the definition of devil is 'self-engrossed still,' and whosoever lives for himself is dead. Don't let the earth be the centre of your system, but the sun. Do not live to yourselves, or your pleasures will all be ignoble and creeping, but live to God. 'Remember.' Well, then, you and I know a good deal more about God than the writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes

did—both about what He is and how to remember Him. I am not going to content myself by taking his point of view, but I must take a far higher and a far better one. If he had been here he would have said ‘Remember God.’ He would have said, ‘Look at God in Jesus Christ, and trust Him and love Him; go to Him as your Saviour, and take all the burden of your past sin and lay it upon His merciful shoulders, and for His dear sake look for forgiveness and cleansing and then for His dear sake live to serve and bless Him. Never mind about yourself, and do not think much about your gladness. Follow in the footsteps of Him who has shown us that the highest joy is to give oneself utterly away. Love Jesus Christ and trust Him and serve Him, and that will make all your gladness permanent.’ There is one thing I want to teach you. Look at that description, or rather read when you go home the description which follows my text, of that wretched old man who has got no hope in God and no joy, feeble in body, going down to the grave, and dying out at last. That is what rejoicing in the days of thy youth, and walking in the ways of thine own heart, come to when you do not remember God. There is nothing more miserable on the face of this earth than an ill-conditioned old man, who is ill-conditioned because he has lost his early joys and early strength, and has got nothing to make up for them. How many of your joys, my dear young friends, will last when old age comes to you? How many of them will survive when your eye is no longer bright, and your hand no longer strong, and your foot no longer fleet? How many of them, young woman! when the light is out of your eye, and the beauty and freshness out of your face and figure, when you are no longer able for

parties, when it is no longer a pastime to read novels, and when the ballroom is not exactly the place for you,—how many of your pleasures will survive? Young man! how many of yours will last when you can no longer go into dissipation, and stomach and system will no longer stand fast living, nor athletics, and the like? Oh! let me beseech thee, go to the ant and consider her ways, who in the summer layeth up for the winter; and do ye likewise in the days of your youth, store up for yourselves that which knows no change and laughs at the decay of flesh and sense. A thousand motives coincide and press on my memory if I had words and time to speak them. Let me beseech you—especially you young men and women of this congregation, of some of whom I may venture to speak as a father to his children, whom I have seen growing up, as it were, from your mothers' arms, and the rest of you whom I do not know so well—Oh! carry away with you this beseeching entreaty of mine at the end. Love Jesus Christ and trust to Him as your Saviour; serve Him as your Captain and your King in the days of your youth. Do not offer Him the fag end of a life—the last inch of the candle that is burning down into the socket. Do it now, for the moments are flying, and you may never have Him offered to you any more. If there is any softening, any touch of conscience in your heart, yield to the impulse and do not stifle it. Take Christ for your Saviour, take Him now—'Now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation.'

THE CONCLUSION OF THE MATTER

'Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them; 2. While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain: 3. In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened, 4. And the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of musick shall be brought low; 5. Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets: 6. Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern. 7. Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it. . . . 13. Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. 14. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.'—ECCLES. xii. 1-7, 13, 14.

THE Preacher has passed in review 'all the works that are done under the sun,' and has now reached the end of his long investigation. It has been a devious path. He has announced many provisional conclusions, which are not intended for ultimate truths, but rather represent the progress of the soul towards the final, sufficient ground and object of belief and aim of all life, even God Himself. 'Vanity of vanities' is a cheerless creed and a half-truth. Its completion lies in being driven, by recognising vanity as stamped on all creatures, to clasp the one reality. 'All is vanity' apart from God, but He is fullness, and possessed and enjoyed and endured in Him, life is not 'a striving after wind.' Leave out this last section, and this book of so-called 'Wisdom' is one-sided and therefore error, as is modern pessimism, which only says more feebly what the Preacher had said long ago. Take the rest of the book as the autobiography of a seeker after reality, and this last section as his declaration of where he had

found it, and all the previous parts fall into their right places.

Our passage omits the first portion of the closing section, which is needed in order to set the counsel to remember the Creator in its right relation. Observe that, properly rendered, the advice in verse 1 is 'remember also,' and that takes us back to the end of the preceding chapter. There the young are exhorted to enjoy the bright, brief blossom-time of their youth, withal keeping the consciousness of responsibility for its employment. In earlier parts of the book similar advice had been given, but based on different grounds. Here religion and full enjoyment of youthful buoyancy and delight in fresh, unhackneyed, homely pleasures are proclaimed to be perfectly compatible. The Preacher had no idea that a devout young man or woman was to avoid pleasures natural to their age. Only he wished their joy to be pure, and the stern law that 'whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap' to be kept in mind. Subject to that limitation, or rather that guiding principle, it is not only allowable, but commanded, to 'put away sorrow and evil.' Young people are often liable to despondent moods, which come over them like morning mists, and these have to be fought against. The duty of joy is the more imperative on the young because youth flies so fast, or, as the Preacher says, 'is vanity.'

Now these advices sound very like the base incitements to sensual and unworthy delight which poets of the meaner sort, and some, alas! of the nobler in their meaner moments, have presented. But this writer is no teacher of 'Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,' and wicked trash of that sort. Therefore he brings side by side with these advices the other of our passage. That

'also' saves the former from being misused, just as the thought of judgment did.

That possible combination of hearty; youthful glee and true religion is the all-important lesson of this passage. The word for Creator is in the plural number, according to the Hebrew idiom, which thereby expresses supremacy or excellence. The name of 'Creator' carries us back to Genesis, and suggests one great reason for the injunction. It is folly to forget Him on whom we depend for being; it is ingratitude to forget, in the midst of the enjoyments of our bright, early days, Him to whom we owe them all. The advice is specially needed; for youth has so much, that is delightful in its novelty, to think about, and the world, on both its innocent and its sinful side, appeals to it so strongly, that the Creator is only too apt to be crowded out of view by His works. The temptation of the young is to live in the present. Reflection belongs to older heads; spontaneous action is more characteristic of youth. Therefore, they specially need to make efforts to bring clearly to their thoughts both the unseen future and Him who is invisible. The advice is specially suitable for them; for what is begun early is likely to last and be strong.

It is hard for older men, stiffened into habits, and with less power and love of taking to new courses, to turn to God, if they have forgotten Him in early days. Conversion is possible at any age, but it is less likely as life goes on. The most of men who are Christians have become so in the formative period between boyhood and thirty. After that age, the probabilities of radical change diminish rapidly. So, 'Remember . . . in the days of thy youth,' or the likelihood is that you will never remember. To say, 'I mean to have my

fling, and I shall turn over a new leaf when I am older,' is to run dreadful risk. Perhaps you will never be older. Probably, if you are, you will not want to turn the leaf. If you do, what a shame it is to plan to give God only the dregs of life! You need Him quite as much, if not more, now in the flush of youth as in old age. Why should you rob yourself of years of blessing, and lay up bitter memories of wasted and polluted moments? If ever you turn to God in your older days, nothing will be so painful as the remembrance that you forgot Him so long.

The advice is further important, because it presents the only means of delivering life from the 'vanity' which the Preacher found in it all. Therefore he sets it at the close of his meditations. This is the practical outcome of them all. Forget God, and life is a desert. Remember Him, and 'the desert will rejoice and blossom as the rose.'

The verses from the middle of verse 1 to the end of verse 7 enforce the exhortation by the consideration of what will certainly follow youth, and advise remembrance of the Creator before that future comes. So much is clear, but the question of the precise meaning of these verses is much too large for discussion here. The older explanation takes them for an allegory representing the decay of bodily and mental powers in old age, whilst others think that in them the advance of death is presented under the image of an approaching storm. Wright, in his valuable commentary, regards the description of the gradual waning away of life in old age, in the first verses, as being set forth under images drawn from the closing days of the Palestinian winter, which are dreaded as peculiarly unhealthy, while verse 4b and verse 5 present the

advent of spring, and contrast the new life in animals and plants with the feebleness of the man dying in his chamber and unable to eat. Still another explanation is that the whole is part of a dirge, to be taken literally, and describing the mourners in house and garden. I venture, though with some hesitation, to prefer, on the whole, the old allegorical theory, for reasons which it would be impossible to condense here. It is by no means free from difficulty, but is, as I think, less difficult than any of its rivals.

Interpreters who adopt it differ somewhat in the explanation of particular details, but, on the whole, one can see in most of the similes sufficient correspondence for a poet, however foreign to modern taste such a long-drawn and minute allegory may be. 'The keepers of the house' are naturally the arms; the 'strong men,' the legs; the 'grinding women,' the teeth; the 'women who look out at the windows,' the eyes; 'the doors shut towards the street,' either the lips or, more probably, the ears. 'The sound of the grinding,' which is 'low,' is by some taken to mean the feeble mastication of toothless gums, in which case the 'doors' are the lips, and the figure of the mill is continued. 'Arising at the voice of the bird' may describe the light sleep or insomnia of old age; but, according to some, with an alteration of rendering ('The voice riseth into a sparrow's'), it is the 'childish treble' of Shakespeare. The former is the more probable rendering and reference. The allegory is dropped in verse 5*a*, which describes the timid walk of the old, but is resumed in 'the almond trees shall flourish'; that is, the hair is blanched, as the almond blossom, which is at first delicate pink, but fades into white. The next clause has an appropriate meaning in

the common translation, as vividly expressing the loss of strength, but it is doubtful whether the verb here used ever means 'to be a burden.' The other explanations of the clause are all strained. The next clause is best taken, as in the Revised Version, as describing the failure of appetite, which the stimulating caper-berry is unable to rouse. All this slow decay is accounted for, 'because the man is going to his long home,' and already the poet sees the mourners gathering for the funeral procession.

The connection of the long-drawn-out picture of senile decay with the advice to remember the Creator needs no elucidation. That period of failing powers is no time to begin remembering God. How dreary, too, it will be, if God is not the 'strength of the heart,' when 'heart and flesh fail'! Therefore it is plain common sense, in view of the future, not to put off to old age what will bless youth, and keep the advent of old age from being wretched.

Verses 6 and 7 still more stringently enforce the precept by pointing, not to the slow approach, but to the actual arrival of death. If a future of possible weakness and gradual creeping in on us of death is reason for the exhortation, much more is the certainty that the crash of dissolution will come. The allegory is partially resumed in these verses. The 'golden bowl' is possibly the head, and, according to some, the 'silver cord' is the spinal marrow, while others think rather of the bowl or lamp as meaning the body, and the cord the soul which, as it were, holds it up. The 'pitcher' is the heart, and the 'wheel' the organs of respiration. Be this as it may, the general thought is that death comes, shivering the precious reservoir of light, and putting an end to drawing of life from the Fountain of

bodily life. Surely these are weighty reasons for the Preacher's advice. Surely it is well for young hearts sometimes to remember the end, and to ask, 'What will ye do in the end?' and to do before the end what is so hard to begin doing at the end, and so needful to have done if the end is not to be worse than 'vanity.'

The collapse of the body is not the end of the man, else the whole force of the argument in the preceding verses would disappear. If death is annihilation, what reason is there for seeking God before it comes? Therefore verse 7 is no interpolation to bring a sceptical book into harmony with orthodox Jewish belief, as some commentators affirm. The 'contradiction' between it and Ecclesiastes iii. 21 is alleged as proof of its having been thus added. But there is no contradiction. The former passage is interrogative, and, like all the earlier part of the book, sets forth, not the Preacher's ultimate convictions, but a phase through which he passed on his way to these. It is because man is two-fold, and at death the spirit returns to its divine Giver, that the exhortation of verse 1 is pressed home with such earnestness.

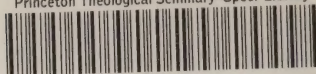
The closing verses are confidently asserted to be, like verse 7, additions in the interests of Jewish 'orthodoxy.' But Ecclesiastes is made out to be a 'sceptical book' by expelling these from the text, and then the character thus established is taken to prove that they are not genuine. It is a remarkably easy but not very logical process.

'The end of the matter' when all is heard, is, to 'fear God and keep His commandments.' The inward feeling of reverent awe which does not exclude love, and the outward life of conformity to His will, is 'the whole duty of man,' or 'the duty of every man.' And that

plain summary of all that men need to know for practical guidance is enforced by the consideration of future judgment, which, by its universal sweep and all-revealing light, must mean the judgment in another life.

Happy they who, through devious mazes of thought and act, have wandered seeking for the vision of any good, and having found all to be vanity, have been led at last to rest, like the dove in the ark, in the broad simplicity of the truth that all which any man needs for blessedness in the buoyancy of fresh youthful strength and in the feebleness of decaying age, in the stress of life, in the darkness of death, and in the day of judgment, is to 'fear God and keep His commandments'!

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